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**DEDICATED TO**

# Cori Grey

***Harnessing Chaos*** could not exist without you. Everyday, I am grateful for your influence, love, and encouragement.

# Moki and the Erased Ones

Joel Grey

# Table of Contents


| | |
|---|---|
| Foreword by the Author | xiii |
| a History of Ages | 20 |
| Chapter 1 | 24 |
| Chapter 2 | 30 |
| Chapter 3 | 35 |
| Chapter 4 | 43 |
| Chapter 5 | 48 |
| Chapter 6 | 54 |
| Chapter 7 | 58 |
| Chapter 8 | 60 |
| Chapter 9 | 66 |
| Chapter 10 | 78 |
| Chapter 11 | 84 |
| Chapter 12 | 86 |
| Chapter 13 | 91 |
| Chapter 14 | 95 |
| Chapter 15 | 102 |
| Chapter 16 | 108 |

Chapter 17 116
Chapter 18 124
Chapter 19 127
Chapter 20 137
Chapter 21 146
Chapter 22 151
Chapter 23 158
Chapter 24 176
Chapter 25 182
Chapter 26 189
Chapter 27 198
Chapter 28 204
Chapter 29 208

Harnessing Chaos Book II:
(Preview)

# Tero and the Cave of the Ancients


Chapter 1 215
Chapter 2 219
Chapter 3 224
Chapter 4 230
Chapter 5 234
Chapter 6 237
Chapter 7 240
Chapter 8 248


# Appendix


Harnessing Chaos Primer 269
The History of Asmita 273

# Foreword

Te'a, the world of harnessing Chaos, has played a significant part in my creative life, in some way or another, for over 20 years.

In 2000, while I was still in High School, I'd first began writing scenes and prompts in various notebooks about characters living in the abandoned ruins of a domed city many generations after an apocalyptic cataclysm. I'd been working at a Video Store in my hometown after school and had fallen in love with the architectural aesthetic of the 1976 sci-fi film, *Logan's Run*. I have always been fascinated with stories where the worlds themselves become characters within the tales they are set. I would watch *the Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth* religiously. I found the look of Jim Henson and Brian Froud's delightfully grotesque creatures

would always influence the creation of any beings that would come to populate my fantasy writing, intentional or not.

We read the Hobbit in English class and I was fascinated by J.R.R Tolkien's process and how he had written multiple languages and entire histories for his Middle Earth as a scaffolding with which to hang his narratives.

That resonated deeply with me.

There were long stretches where not much happened with my unnamed fantasy world save for the odd writing prompt or journal entry.

I'd had a series of very difficult experiences in my 20s that steered my writing away from fantasy and into dark, insular musings that would eventually become my existential thriller trilogy: *Ouroboros*. The writing of which caused me to retreat into the perceived safety of isolation. I began to distance myself from what I then viewed as a bleak, unfriendly world both physically and emotionally. I was convinced I was experiencing visceral premonitions of a world-ending event that could take place at any moment. It was very difficult to try and find motivation to build anything when my mind was screaming at me that catastrophe was imminently possible. I saw myself as a Cassandra-type character who was fated to see future events yet would never be believed. Ouroboros warped the lens with which I'd viewed the world and became such a monolith within my psyche that every creative endeavor during that time was in some way tethered to it.

Circumstances aligned where I was able to attend college in 2009. I felt more social, more creative, and more connected to the arts scene in Winnipeg than I ever had. In my attempts to connect every creative assignment I could back to Ouroboros, my final project for my communications diploma became a 15-minute short film focusing on the events of the second novel: *Happiness in Slavery*.

After graduating, I'd sent the short film to festivals across Canada and the U.S. in hopes of generating interest that I'd hoped would see Ouroboros physically published but nothing materialized except a collection of rejection letters.

The job market upon graduation was abysmal and I quickly fell into a depression. I returned to the familiarity of my self-imposed isolation. I'd been playing a lot of RPGs alone in my studio apartment. As I played, memories of that old fantasy world I'd once been playing around with back in High School flooded back to me. I started jotting down possible quests that a character might undertake within my fantasy world were it to actually become a video game. I was invigorated. I started drawing maps, sketching characters and monsters, and scribbling expansive lore and intricate political histories into notebooks.

I began coding a 16-bit retro-style RPG based on my emerging world that would monopolize my attention and energy for the better part of a year until I felt I was ready to pitch it to game developers. I created an interactive website that showcased a playable opening

section of the RPG game along with concept art, a plot treatment, and even an original soundtrack but it failed to generate any interest from developers.

A series of events forced me from my studio apartment in Winnipeg in the summer of 2013 and I returned to my hometown. Discouraged, I spent my time working various jobs around town while I tried to determine what it was I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

I returned to the media that brought me comfort as a child. I watched a lot of *the Dark Crystal*, *Labyrinth, Back to the Future,* and *Ladyhawke*.

I saved up and bought a used PS3. I played a lot of *Skyrim*, *Mass Effect*, and other immersive RPGs. I read a lot of Philip K. Dick (specifically his novel *V.A.L.I.S.*) I read Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series, and Jean M. Auel's *Earth's Children* series.

At a thrift store I found a book by T. Lobsang Rampa from the 60s called *the Cave of the Ancients* which I found wholly consuming. The book felt like the keystone locking all the other elements in place for the fictional world of Te'a to truly exist. I became obsessed with the idea of "forbidden history" and the fantastical concept of epic civilizations whose existence could've been omitted or scrubbed entirely from historical accounts. I produced volumes of scribbled lore and hastily sketched character designs over this period while I enjoyed the quiet isolation of my hometown.

It was around that time the series finally received a

title. The name paralleled my own experiences of trying to desperately enforce order over the overwhelming uncertainty that seemed to encircle me.

In 2014, I got a job as a reporter for the local paper which was also where I met fellow journalist and my future wife, Cori. She introduced me to a staggering amount of media that I'd pompously written off because I'd decided I was *too old for such things*. Without Cori, I would not have engaged with Young Adult fiction like the *Graceling* series, the *Hunger Games* series and other media like the tv series *Avatar: the Last Airbender, Gravity Falls,* or *Steven Universe*, which would come to inform a lot of the tone in what would become the *Harnessing Chaos* series and influence the way the characters were written.

I was laid off from my journalist position at the newspaper in 2018 and once again I was unemployed. I started working at a manufacturing plant that created heart monitoring electrodes where I used the long, noisy shifts sitting at the various machines to daydream and craft the world of Te'a.

Just before COVID hit in 2020, I became unemployed once again when the manufacturing plant shut down production. Only weeks afterward, I lost my 97-year-old grandfather. Our family had been taking shifts at the care-home near the end so that he would always have someone there with him. I'd digitized our family's home videos and had them playing on a loop on his TV. His physical and mental degeneration made me wish for a way he could've been restored to the youthful man

that appeared on the tv screen. This thought became the inspiration to the character Rel's storyline in the series.

I married my wife, Cori Grey, in the summer of 2020 in our backyard with only our close family in attendance when gatherings larger than a dozen people were restricted. Her love brought me back to life. She helped me return to art and reconnect with my creativity. We would watch ASMR videos on YouTube together about painting and that's where I discovered my love for watercolours. I painted dozens and dozens of pieces over that period. They all seemed to share an aesthetic that would become the basis for the world of Te'a.

In the fall of 2020 I began writing *Moki and the Erased Ones*. It would be the first novel in the series.

Soon after, I began compiling all of the disparate notes within the many writing journals I'd accrued over the past 20 years and set to work on cementing all the overarching details of this new world. I wrote the bulk of the series over the next few years.

I starting coming out of my isolation after COVID and tried to be more social. I became friends with the husbands of my wife's friends. I learned they were into tabletop role-playing games and joined my first campaign as a player. We played weekly sessions for a long while and eventually I became a Dungeon Master (DM) myself. I ran a *homebrew* campaign that I set within the world of Harnessing Chaos. The reception I received from my new friends was so encouraging

that it intensified my creative drive and propelled me into writing the prequel series: *Children of the Crimson Insurrection*. In January of 2023, *Moki and the Erased Ones* was published in both hardcover and paperback editions.

I am extremely grateful for the experiences both good and bad that have formed me and allowed this moment to blossom.

Thank you, dear reader, for joining me on this journey. I am excited to share the world of Te'a with you.

**- Joel Grey**
2024

# A History of Ages

The arrival of the Light-bringers marked the divide between the *Age of Innocence* and the *Age of Harmony*. The Light-bringers had come to Te'a as explorers, adventurers, and teachers. They united the Y'nari, who until then had been living in isolated clusters, as a single nation. For generations, the Light-bringers ruled all of Te'a. They were seen by the Y'nari as benevolent and revered as gods. The Light-bringers imparted their wisdom and technology to the Y'nari and guided them away from their tribal isolationism toward a singular civilization that spanned the breadth of Te'a. The many generations of prosperity and growth afterward climaxed violently, ending in a wave of destruction that fractured the united Y'nari civilization. The Light-bringers disappeared in the cataclysm and

the Y'nari who were left behind reformed themselves into 7 tribes.

This was the *Age of Empires*.

Rising to fill the void left behind when the Lightbringers disappeared were the A'ua'ki and the Ark'fey. Already splintered, the 7 Y'nari tribes took sides. The A'ua'ki and their Y'nari allies ejected the Ark'fey and their Y'nari followers from Asmita pushing them out into the oppressive, perpetual light of Ovin and the icy, eternal darkness of Vol on either side of Asmita's band of permanent dusk that wrapped around Te'a.

The A'ua'ki ruled over the Y'nari of Asmita throughout the *Age of Empires*. As their malevolent grip tightened, the blight appeared to poison the land and its inhabitants alike. An Y'nari rebellion against the A'ua'ki ended the Age of Empires, overthrowing their oppressive rulers with a vociferous fury that once again fragmented the Y'nari into distinct tribes.

After the Empire fell, one tribe claimed the central plains of Asmita as their own. The Tul'Ynarr tried to consolidate their power and influence into their own empire they called Tul. The other Y'nari were forced to flee the central plains as the Tuleans began their campaign of ethnic cleansing; hoping to purify Tul of all traces of the other six Y'nari tribes.

The Qiat'Ynarr settled beyond the Labyrinth in the northern plains of Ur'Bos. The Sun'Ynarr fortified the swamps of Aq'Adez claiming ancient A'ua'ki ruins as their own. The Osk'Ynarr mystics haunted the Blighted Lands that straddled the darkness of Vol where the

shadowy Vol'Ynarr roam its icy wastes. The Mok'Ynarr disappeared into the Feros Woods where Tul met Ovin. Protected by the thick forests and dense fog, the Mok'Ynarr became the blue witches; the villains of the dark tales the Tul'Ynarr traumatized their children with to discourage them from entering the woods. Lastly, those Ysat'Ynarr who survived the Tulean purge retreated underground; burrowing deep within Te'a. They had not been heard from again since.

Now, is the *Age of Chaos*.

***Te'a: A History of Ages***
***Pers'Is the Immortal Historian***
***Book 1: Chapter 3, Verse 1-13***

# Chapter 1

Moki had pale blue hair. It was unusual as no one else in Tul had blue hair. Her horns curled back on themselves with their points reappearing by her jaw. They framed her wavy blue hair in a way that was quite noticeable when Tess citizens were not supposed to be able to have blue hair. Nor were they supposed to have horns that curled back on themselves in the way Moki's did. Tulean horns did not curl at all. They were supposed to be set forward, broad, straight, strong, and short. Far too short to curl back upon themselves.

Tess was the last city before the A'Yrr Mountain Pass that marked the edge of the province of Tul. It once made the city a central cacophony of traffic and trade before the wars with the other three provinces of

Asmita: Ur'Bos, Kent, and Aq'Adez. Now, Tess was more of a last stop for the exodus flooding out from Tul. The nearest province on the other side of the mountains, Aq'Adez, was spoken about like some kind of sanctuary. On listless, boring Qi'Ar, Moki had fantasized about leaving Tess and seeking out the paradise Aq'Adez was rumoured to be. Bloodshed had not yet travelled as far across Tul as to reach Tess. Still, the economic reach of the wars had bankrupted nearly everyone who wasn't directly profiting from the conflicts.

Moki had always worked at the Inn where she was found as an infant. The Innkeepers, Eo and Wensa, had cared for her and raised her as theirs. She'd seen nineteen Ki festivals, but had only been taking part in them for the last four. It didn't take her long to realize she preferred working at the Inn to participating in the *seeding festival*.

For the most part, Moki found the idea of Ki-joining disagreeable; especially with many of the Pod'ka in Tess. She'd been joining for a few cycles and had become much more selective now that the mystique of joining had faded. For most people, the Ki and Pen'ar festivals (and their rituals) were a tradition publicly followed but ubiquitously broken away from in private. It had once been that people could *only* join during the twin festivals. Ki in the warming season and Pen'ar when it cooled. Instead, each became separate styles of joining.

Her first joining was with an older Pod'ka who'd been travelling from the far western edge of Tul, near the Wall of Ky'nopsys. Moki had assumed the sensuous

blend of Ki and Pen'ar joining they'd shared was just what Ki-joining *was*. Then she tried to recreate that experience with a less experienced Tulean.

The Ki festival always started off with a display of Pod'ka virility. Those who wished to would paint their bare chests with a dye they'd made from harvested animal organs, soot, and Ub'voss urine. They would slap their chests and shout and wave their arms around so the scent of dead flesh, smoke, and urine could waft over the ur'ka in the crowd that had come to witness *Uk'sanpo*. The ritual was supposed to make ur'ka more inclined to Ki-join with the Pod'ka but Moki was skeptical though also wasn't enthusiastic about testing its effectiveness either. It had seemed to work on the ur'ka who would gather close in any case.

Moki made it a point to always be working during *the Big Drink;* a ritual that basically endorsed the wanton imbibing of otherwise frowned upon quantities of ale. All the rowdy patrons would be away at the festival grounds and the tavern would be relatively silent. Moki wondered if this Ki festival would pleasantly conclude uneventfully.

Then Cesynn stumbled in.

Cesynn had desired Moki since she'd first announced her participation in the biannual joining festivals. It was obnoxiously obvious to Moki that Cesynn desired to possess her and not to *experience* her as the older Pod'ka from western Tul had those years ago. After a few unfulfilling experiences with *a'crowe* (a term used for Pod'ka who exploded loudly yet briefly when ignited

by their Ki) Moki had decided that she would only take part in the Pen'ar festivals each autumn.

When it cooled, the colours of the valley were alight with a dying vibrancy that she found calming. The rituals were more contemplative. Slower.

In vociferous contrast, the Ki festival was an oppressive mix of heat and hormones. For Moki, Ki seemed to make all of Tess glow with a fiery malevolent lust.

Cesynn sauntered around the Inn singing a crude tune about forcefully joining with an ur'ka's face. Moki rolled her eyes and some of the more traditional women in the Inn feigned offense.

Tess had made her feel other her whole life giving her no desire to follow along in its traditions. The Pen'ar festivals though were something she looked forward to every season. Even Pod'ka she might otherwise avoid were allowed to be gentle (one might even say vulnerable) during Pen'ar. Some Pod'ka were only tolerable during Pen'ar. Moki stared at Cesynn drunkly singing his lewd tune and thought about how some Pod'ka were *never* tolerable.

Moki mostly joined with ur'ka but wouldn't turn away a Pod'ka traveler she found intriguing. Moki was not interested in bearing offspring, which was the intended functional goal of the seeding festival. In her experience, the Pod'ka consensus had been that wearing anything to prevent conception did not feel the same as without. Thus, it was considered an inferior way to experience joining. Moki often ended things before they

began with those kind of Pod'ka.

Cesynn continued to move awkwardly around the tavern singing. He turned toward her and his face was scrunched down into a look Moki realized was intended to be striking but actually wasn't at all. She rolled her eyes again.

"I just . . ." Cesynn started loudly but then looked like he was about to vomit and paused before starting again. His short but drunkenly unkempt hair hid one of his horns while the other one gleamed with a conspicuous sheen of one who'd just left the polishers. "I just wanted to say that I am invoking Tes'tarann. "

Cesynn waved his arms around expressively, making sure that everyone in the Inn had heard him before turning back to Moki.

"I'm going to Ki-join with you," Cesynn said, drunkenly pointing an unsteady finger at her.

"Pass," Moki turned to walk away.

The elderly ur'ka wearing a ceremonial seeding festival hat that wasn't even trying to hide that it was shaped like Pod'ka genitals gasped at Moki's blasphemous rejection. One couldn't simply reject an invocation of Tes'tarann. Moki swatted dismissively in the ur'ka's direction.

"I'm coming back, Moki," Cesynn called after her. "I'm coming back victorious from the Tes'tarann and then you'll have to Ki-join with me. If you don't, I'll take it to the Elders."

"Please do," she called from the other side of the door to the kitchen as it closed behind her.

# Chapter 2

At first she wasn't worried. Then, she realized that if Cesynn was successful and she didn't Ki-join with him it would reflect very badly on Eo, Wensa and the Inn. Their Inn was already struggling as was everyone else in Tul who weren't already a part of the Tulean war effort or the black leaf trade.

Moki followed Cesynn up the hill that rose from behind Tess. It led beyond the city walls where the ground spiked upward sharply into winding, criss-crossing paths that cut their way up into the rocks. The A'Yrr Mountain Pass bore straight through the mountain range. It was the only way through to Aq'Adez without going around the Mountains into the baked wastes of Ovin to the south.

Moki could only see for a ways in front of her before

the dark shadows of the towering rock faces flanking the pass swallowed up the trail.

She turned back to where the shadows of the two gates of Tess on either side of the city below stabbed up into the sky. One gate opened up to the farms and fields that lined the river bleeding out of the city, winding its way through the province of Tul. The other gate belched up the Ti'hann Road, which meandered off into the icy, black embrace of Vol beyond the northern horizon. She'd taken the Ti'hann Road often on her frequent visits to the Or'nus Falls. Mentally, she was planning a relaxing trip to the falls after she dealt with the chaos of the Ki festival.

Cesynn was a capable hunter but the Tes'tarann was a dangerous endeavour for even the most skilled and he was belligerently drunk. A large part of her was worried that Cesynn's unwarranted and artificially engorged confidence would help him actually pull it off.

As he neared the den, Cesynn wasn't even trying to be silent. He was shouting out for a confrontation. Moki watched curiously from the shadows. It would have been safer coming by during the daylight and Mōt was already hanging low in the sky when Cesynn had left. The walk to the den had taken quite a while. The valley in the distance was cast the faintest warm glow as Mōt continued to set. Cesynn and Moki were in the cool shadows of the mountains above them. Only Ka still shone, unmoving above them as she alway was and would be forever. Were it not for Ka, Tul would be blanketed the same shadow that cradled Vol.

With Mōt away, Ka was the lone defender against the darkness of Qi'Ar. Qi'Ar was Moki's favourite part of the day. She'd be alone with only Ka as a companion. While others slept, Moki would ask Ka questions and often pretend she was answering. Wensa had told her to be respectful, and mindful of what she asked Ka as 'she listens and sometimes might respond'.

She heard a low, guttural snort and Moki sunk lower to the ground, laying her bow flat beneath her hand. With her free hand, she gently gripped the arrows in her quiver together to silence them.

She noticed how Cesynn had instantly lost his former confidence. Cessyn made a face as if he was somehow only now realizing that taking on a Ye'Pann by himself with just a dagger and a full bladder of ale was inadvisable. The Ye'Pann stepped out of the thick, syrupy blackness of its den. Cesynn screamed in a way that might have been funny under different circumstances. Instead, Cesynn's terrified yelp came as part of the irrelevant white noise as Moki focused on the rough, rhythmic thuds of each of the Ye'Pann's legs. They kicked up bursts of coarse, gritty dust as the Ye'Pann sped toward Cesynn. It yawned open its toothy maw wide. Moki saw the back two legs tense up; readying to leap. She nocked the arrow and aimed for the space between the Ye'Pann and Cesynn. The way Eo had taught her. She let the arrow fly. She watched it as it shot towards empty space. She saw the Ye'Pann launching toward and saw the imminent connection in her mind.

*Leaving the space it was,* she could almost hear Eo's voice in her head. *Entering the space it will be.*

The Ye'Pann hadn't realized there was an arrow coming for it. It still hadn't known when it crossed into *the space it will be* and the arrow pierced its brain.

Cesynn lay on the ground, panting; swearing. His eyes couldn't move away from the twitching form of the monstrous Ye'Pann within swatting distance. It took him a few moments to notice the arrow and then make the connection that there must also then be an archer.

"Hello?" Cesynn called out into the darkness.

Moki thought about not saying anything and then the sassy, petty part of herself made her shout out: "I guess *I'm* invoking Tes'tarann, Cesynn."

"Moki?" His voice cracked. "You? You shot that arrow?"

Moki stepped out and started towards the still form of the Ye'Pann.

"This ones pretty big," Moki said.

"*Pretty* big?" Cesynn blinked, disbelievingly. "*This* one?!"

"Definitely top five biggest," she said.

"Wait, you know how to shoot an arrow?"

"Yes, with a bow," she rolled her eyes and sat down on the exposed belly of the dead Ye'Pann. "Listen, you don't want others knowing that the freaky Mok'Ynarr from the Inn saved you from your own Tes'tarann, so let's compromise. You can say that you killed it and Ki-join with anyone that isn't me. Fair?"

Cesynn nodded numbly; still trying to catch his

breath distractedly as Moki started to walk away.

"Wait, where did you learn to shoot an arrow?" He called after her but she didn't respond as she faded into the darkness.

Moki waited in the shadows of the mountainside until Cesynn collected himself enough to labouredly behead the Ye'Pann with his pristine dagger. He clumsily made the trek back down to Tess with the proof of his conquest of the Tes'tarann. Once he was little more than a dot in the distance, Moki emerged from the shadows and returned to the Ye'Pann.

Moki had hoped that Cesynn would've turned back before ever reaching the den; she had not wanted to kill the Ye'Pann. Now that she had, Moki was glad she'd brought along tools to field dress the beast. That much meat would be quite the help to Wensa. The cost of meat at Ir'zah Market was always rising. Merchants said the shortages were because of a sickness that was killing off whole herds of cattle in the northwestern countryside. In any case, Wensa wouldn't have to go to market for a while. It had been far too long since Wensa had made her Ye'Pasi Nas soup. Moki found herself smiling.

# Chapter 3

"My precious little one," Eo smiled gently as she entered the Inn. "I am grateful for every Qi'Ar the darkness brings you back to us" "I too am grateful you are safe this evening, Eo." Moki lifted her leather satchel onto the table. "Ye'Pann meat. As much as I could carry. There is more out there that I wrapped and placed in the cache. We can pick it up tomorrow morning when it is light out."

"Ye'Pann meat, huh?" Eo smiled. "So did *you* invoke Tes'tarann on Cesynn?"

Moki made a face that caused Eo's wrinkled face to ripple as he erupted in jovial laughter. She helped Eo to prepare the Inn for Qi'Ar and then went to her room to sleep but couldn't.

So many Os she'd spent living at the Inn. She'd seen

many travellers come through Tess. Most were on their way through to the A'Yrr Mountain Pass to Aq'Adez or Ur'Bos further north. They'd come from far off regions of Tul. Of the countless Y'nari travellers (almost all of them Tul'Ynarr) none had ever had blue hair. Rumour was that Moki was the last of the *blue witches*, the Mok'Ynarr. Eo had raised Moki to embrace the tale, naming her Moki Az'Urrka.

*The Spirit of the Mok'Ynarr.*

In her youth, Tess children had assaulted her with the legend of the Mok'Ynarr at every opportunity. According to them, the Mok'Ynarr had been cast out and lived separately from the respectable folk of Tul. Isolated after having been purged from society by the King of Tul. Argonos the Conqueror. In the years before *the Great Sundering*, Argonos had been a wealthy landowner. Portrayed as heroic and courageous, Argonos had whipped the local lords into an angry, frothing army that marched on the Tulean capitol, Ar'mot, to challenge the original rulers of the valley, the Ark'fey. They described the Mok'Ynarr as a crafty, shifty, calculating race of blue haired witches whose prowess in battle was only matched by their traitorous deceptiveness. Of course, it was understandable that the Ark'fey and the Mok'Ynarr were portrayed as the villains in the official retelling of the legend as Argonos had exited the Great Sundering as the new leader of what he came to call the province of Tul.

The way Eo related the legend to Moki was more nuanced though he only spoke it to Moki as whispered,

heretical Qi'Ar stories. According to Eo, the Ark'fey had benevolently governed from the ancient seat of power, Ar'mot, for countless Os. The Mok'Ynarr had been wise and talented advisors to the Ark'fey. They were adept wu'jik casters and skilled warriors. The *most* adept and skilled of the Mok'Ynarr was called the I'ra Cas'ta whose guidance and input the Ark'fey valued above all others.

To hear the locals talk about the Mok'Ynarr you'd have thought they were aggressive and feral. Moki knew they only felt that way because Tuleans saw themselves as citizens of Tul; the new society that had usurped the one that came before.

Eo had been sharing the knowledge of the world before Tul and the Sundered Provinces since she was a young ur'ka. After Argonos, there had been many Kings to rule Tul. Each one had tried to reunify the shattered region and each time Tul was pushed back to its original boundaries: the Wall of Ky'nopsys in the west and the A'Yrr Mountain Pass in the east, the Maw in the mountains to the north, and the Feros Woods to the south.

The Sixth King of Tul, whom his own propaganda had called A'gor the Redeemer, had believed that he was singularly tasked with the reunification of Tul. His vision could not include any references of the past humiliation of Tul. A historical fact he felt was the cause of the Tuleans' unpatriotic disunity. A'gor had started a small volunteer militia at first, as attitudes about war and conscription were generationally unfavourable.

The Eyes of the Er'Ebos, *Sen'Daris Er'Ebos*, was created to snuff out mentions of Tul's history they'd dubbed anachronous.

*May you be redeemed through the flames of Er'Ebos.*

Most found the rote repeating of that socially expected farewell to be a benign obligation. To Moki, it always felt wrong. Throughout the reign of A'gor the Redeemer, vast stores of knowledge had been burnt away. History had been swallowed up by smoke and flame; only to exist in the memories of those who'd experienced it.

Eo had begun passing down what knowledge remained to Moki through a collection of symbols that he'd called Y'vand'dbar.

*All-speak*.

It had been the language of the Ark'fey but now existed only as arrangements of symbols on parchment. Few knew what Y'vand'dbar sounded like and Eo was only just beginning to teach her the phonetics.

Moki was further along with comprehension than she was replication. She had memorized enough of the symbols that she was beginning to decipher the knowledge herself without much help from Eo. However, it was often overwhelming to enter the Inn's basement. Moki found the overflowing shelves and scrolls collected in stacks around the room daunting. There was far more that she had still yet to read than ones she had.

Eo instructed Moki in secret, though Moki never felt the need for the intrigue. A'gor had died many

Os before she'd been born and their current ruler, Em'tornus, was an ineffectual aristocrat who spent all of his time in Ar'mot distracted by the excesses nobility can offer. She'd never seen a soldier of the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos. The only time she'd seen any soldiers had been during the brief skirmishes between Imperial forces and the rebels as they were pushed out of Tul and into the Pass or the Feros Woods. Although then, she'd been a small ur'ka who didn't understand the context of the wounded, bloody travellers that Eo had hid in the basement of their Inn.

The border had been quiet for years now. There were rumours that a distant city to the north was being fortified with Tulean forces mobilizing from all around Tul. Then again, she heard a lot of drunken nonsense while working at the Inn.

Moki often felt alone. Eo and Wensa were the only others who truly understood the framework of the world; beyond them, there was no one. She found it exceedingly difficult to interact with any of the Tuleans in any meaningful way. So much of their world was not the way the locals believed it to be. Yet their ignorance was not any fault of their own. Eo had sternly discouraged Moki from revealing any of the knowledge he had passed down to her to Tuleans. He was worried it would attract the gaze of the seemingly dormant Sen'Daris Er'Ebos.

So instead, Moki endeavoured to soak up all there was to learn from Eo's stockpile of pilfered tomes and scrolls that filled the basement. She let the worlds of

the ancient Ark'fey and A'ua'ki civilizations occupy her mind.

As well as historical knowledge, Moki had been instructed about the use of medicinal and poisonous plants, how to hunt and track, how to build improvised weapons from the environment around her, and many other helpful skills. Wensa was younger and more athletic than Eo and was the one to train her in the martial arts traditions of the Mok'Ynarr who came before her. Wensa would not let Moki forget that if she could not learn their ancient techniques they would die with herself.

Eo had begun teaching her about the various systems of the world. Eo called the greater system *Es'at*. Es'at dictated the rules of why things happened the way they did. Why things would happen again and again in precisely the same way provided nothing in the original system had been changed. Moki was still trying to get her head around some of the concepts.

One ossa while out on the mountain-side picking herbs for one of Wensa's stews, Eo had demonstrated a rule in Es'at where an object on an uneven surface (in this case it had been a small boulder) would always move down the slope of the surface. Never up. Eo called it *Riss Es'at*.

"Es'at is always pulling down, into the Riss," Eo had said as the boulder tumbled down the slope and dropped sharply at the lip of the cliff that opened to the valley below. "It didn't rise. It didn't stay level. It fell." He made a fist above his head and pulled it down with

an added whooshing sound that abruptly cut off with pursed lips.

Moki loved his expressive mannerisms. His whole body would become part of the lessons: an eyebrow, a flap of the arms, and the noises he'd make to accompany particularly poignant points of a lecture.

There were two Royal Es'at as Eo had explained to her. *Riss Es'at* and *E'thur Es'at* were the main forces that held all things in balance. Riss Es'at pulled down and E'thur Es'at pulled up into the sky.

"If there were no Riss Es'at, E'thur would suck us into the sky," Eo had said with a wave of his arms and a whooping noise. "The cooperation of those two forces are what keep everything balanced. If no outside forces are acting on us, Riss and E'thur would both hold us in place; still. But if, like the slope of this mountain, Riss were to be given an advantage over E'thur, then the boulder will always descend. Never ascend."

When they got to the cache, they packed the meat into leather satchels. Once full, they fastened them to themselves for the trek back down to the city. Moki was already exhausted and irritable after the journey down but they then also had to prepare the meat to preserve it. Before they were even finished, Moki had taken a break and stepped out into the Qi'Ar. The scent of smoke, spices, and dead Ye'pann had been stinging her nostrils. She sucked in a fragrant sip of air through her nose and sighed. Moki noticed there was a crowd gathering around Cesynn who was parading the gory head of the Ye'pann around the streets whooping

and shouting and singing the ceremonial Tes'tarann anthem, which mentioned his genitals entirely too often. Moki turned back to the Inn but then heard Cesynn's obnoxious voice shout out her name.

"And Moki!" He said in a pompously triumphant tone. "The *Pod'ur* of my Tes'tarann. My conquest."

She stiffened momentarily but when she turned around she made a bright smile and waved at him; she'd thought of the perfect revenge.

"I think you mean *Ur'pod*, Cesynn. If I'm remembering correctly," she smiled, wryly.

There were scattered gasps and then a few of the Pod'ka began to hysterically slap their thighs and laugh.

"He may have won the Tes'tarann but that *a'crowe* was definitely my Ur'pod," Moki laughed.

Some of the ur'ka turned to stare at Cesynn and giggled. He dropped the head of the Ye'pann and it made a wet thud on the street as he turned red. His eyes grew wide and he pulled his shoulders up to meet his ears. Now, most of the crowd was laughing instead of cheering as Cesynn raced down the street and disappeared around the bend. Moki's wry smile remained as she walked back to the Inn.

# Chapter 4

She hadn't heard from Cesynn for ossa afterward, which was a nice break. He'd been pursuing her as long as she'd known him and she'd never been interested. Not even ale had turned her mind to view Cesynn amorously. Her distaste for him had grown with every new bit of knowledge she came to learn about him. Most of the time she tried to avoid him altogether but Cesynn knew Moki worked at the Inn. So that's where he often spent his time. He *did* spend a lot of money on Wensa's cooking while he tried to interact with Moki which was ultimately helpful to the operations of the Inn. Cesynn could stand to part with more than most. His father was one of the highest ranking of the city patrol. They did the bidding of the Tess Council of Elders who themselves were beholden

to the Tulean Senate in Ar'mot. From there, the only higher authority in Tul was King Em'tornus.

While most in Tul were barely scraping together an existence, Cesynn and his family led ostentatious lives. Cesynn could have anything he wanted and Moki saw how much it angered him that she wasn't something he could have. She hoped his humiliation would make him think twice about ever again claiming her as his and wouldn't be coming by the Inn any time soon.

Moki had gone about the ossa with only R'nox, her blue furred Y'frit, as company. Eo had given R'nox to Moki as an animal companion a few Os earlier when the harassment over her uniquely blue hair had coincided with her *blossoming period*. Eo had told her that Y'frit come from, Ni'yon. A place beyond Tul and the other Provinces where lots of beings had blue hair.

Eo said Ni'yon lay beyond something he'd called *the Koris sea*. She'd never seen it, but Eo told her it existed. He said that at the base of Tul was water like the lake that fed the black throat beneath Or'nus Falls.

Moki had seen the *Throat of Or'nus* many times. She had often stared into the ravenous, black maw that swallowed the sheets of roaring water that crashed down from cliffs above. She loved feeling the warm mist the water cast off as it fell. She'd strain her eyes to see but she could never see the bottom. She often wondered if it went on forever but Eo said that the Throat of Or'nus actually broke off into many small tunnels within the mountains. On the other side of the mountain range all the tunnels converged into something called the Great

Falls, which in turn fed the Or'na River. Eo said if Moki were to follow the Or'na River she would eventually find this Koris sea he'd been talking about.

R'nox the Y'frit scurried playfully around Moki's ankles as she tried to descend the stairs with arms filled expertly with dirty dishes. R'nox shared the same shade of blue hair and that had brought Moki comfort whenever she'd stare out at the sea of repetitive faces that shared their hair colour with the dusty Tulean hillside.

Cesynn hadn't come back at all and Moki had used that extra, hassle-free time to earnestly focus on Eo's teaching. Expanding her understanding of their world. Midway through the Os there was a rumour that Cesynn had run away to join the military presence amassing to contain something called *the blight* that was supposedly rending its way through the northern part of the province.

By the Pen'ar festival in autumn, Eo's tone had changed from jovial to one of somber contemplation; sometimes a quiet restlessness that unnerved her. It seemed like he had begun rushing through lessons. He'd become more and more irritated when the lessons weren't progressing at a pace he was expecting. He started to get more mystical, talking about gods she'd never read about yet in any of the scrolls or tomes.

Wensa downplayed Moki's worries about Eo's sudden change as a care-giver's anxiety over her approaching *the Choosing*.

"You're going to choose soon, Mok'Ynarr Az'Urrka,"

Wensa said. “All care-givers are anxious before *the Choosing*.”

It made sense. Moki didn’t feel like that was it though. There was something else, almost like they were approaching a time limit that was about to swallow shut; an abrupt, inescapable ending.

The closer *the Choosing* came the more confused she felt. The two worlds of Tul and the ancient one in her mind (one tactile and present, the other ephemeral but all consuming) were at constant odds. She was expected to take part in *the Choosing*.

*If only to keep our anonymity in the crowd,* as Eo would say.

Moki didn’t see the purpose of taking part in silly Tulean traditions when her mind was bursting at the seams with another world only few saw.

The closer it came to the Ki festival once again, the more frantic the pace of Eo’s lessons became. He was never short or outwardly upset with Moki but she could see the impatience behind his eyes. A loving impatience but impatience nonetheless.

The cold season was rough and saw many more people leave Tess while the black leaf and the blight moved in. More and more she began to see dazed looking people shuffling about the city with eyes that glowed a dull red.

She had started to notice the black leaf arrive in Tess in the ossa leading up to the Ki festival but still didn’t know much about it. Those who partook had a weird cloud or fog that seemed to follow along behind

them; enclosing them. It looked off-putting and stopped Moki from ever trying it.

There were fewer and fewer ur'ka who were showing interest in wanting to Pen'ar join in favour of embracing the black leaf. The Ki festival was due to start shortly but the usual pomp and circumstance of the previous festivals had been swapped out with a subdued and rote playing out of the various rituals that made up the Ki.

One travelling ur'ka she'd joined with had tried black leaf while stocking up on trade goods in Ar'mot. The ur'ka had expressed her enjoyment of the expansive feeling the black leaf gave her. Whatever that meant. Regardless of how the citizens felt, Moki saw how the citizens looked while they enjoyed the expansive feeling of the black leaf. Moments after inhaling the satiny smoke of the black leaf, a hazy cloud would seep out of their bodies and hang in the air, surrounding them, making their eyes sullen and pale in a way that looked wrong. It made them glow a hazy red.

Eo took Moki out to the hillside, halfway between the slopes of the mountain and the mouth of the pass above with Tess below. He started on again about his gods, *E'om* and *Er'Ebos*, in a vague way that Moki still couldn't wrap her head around. At the end of the lesson he gave her a hug and held her tightly; silently.

She held him tightly back.

They didn't talk the rest of the way down to Tess.

# Chapter 5

She stared at him most of the Qi'Ar but he was somberly going about his duties at the Inn. It saddened her. The large Inn doors swung open. They connected hard against the walls on either side with a coarse thwack that ignited a shiver that rippled through her whole body. She turned to see Cesynn stepping through the doorway. His eyes burned a hazy red. There was a hate in them she had not seen before.

Then she noticed his armour.

She'd seen the crest emblazoned on Cesynn's chest plate in Eo's tomes. Moki only slightly noticed the larger Pod'ka who followed after him as she was pulled in by the malevolent fire in Cesynn's eyes.

"This is the Mok'Ynarr," the larger Pod'ka said to Cesynn.

When she finally turned, Moki saw the Pod'ka had oddly shaped horns that she had never seen before. They stabbed outward from behind a dark helmet. The armour was forged from an unfamiliar kind of material that looked like it absorbed the light around it.

The helmet was made to look like the snarling maw of some cruel, malevolent beast. Moki found the breath had depressed from her chest. She sputtered and coughed once she realized she had stopped breathing. She didn't know what to do other than stare numbly at the dark figure in the grotesque helmet and light leeching armour.

When she saw the crest, Wensa gasped and dropped her tray of baking.

"Yes, Vo'dis Skek," Cesynn said, not taking his gaze from Moki; unblinking.

"And *these two*?" The figure in the dark armour pointed at Eo and Wensa. Vo'dis Skek's voice resonated with an ominous gravitas through the helmet.

Moki stepped in-between them. "No, they di-"

Cesynn slapped Moki across the face with a leather gloved palm. She stared at him in surprise and shock and he replied silently with his wild, wrathful eyes; unblinking.

"Patience, Mor'dari Cesynn," Skek said, causally. "Not before they've had an audience."

"Bring them outside," Cesynn shouted and three armoured soldiers marched into the Inn and violently forced Eo, Wensa, and Moki out into the street. A staggering crowd had formed framed by soldiers

carrying torches that roared angrily in the Qi'Ar breeze.

"Citizens of Tess," Vo'dis Skek bellowed into the crowd who stared back at them silently with hazy, red eyes. "No action will be taken against you."

Moki looked to Eo and Wensa but both were closely watching the Vo'dis.

"We understand why you didn't alert the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos of the impure Osk'Ynarr and Mok'Ynarr infesting your Inn. We understand your apathy from the wars and from the blight. The Sen'Daris Er'Ebos ourselves have been apathetic; we've neglected our duties to you, to Tul, and to our King." The Vo'dis grabbed the nearest soldier's torch and threw it into the thatching on the roof of the Inn. It's light burst and expanded until Moki could feel the heat of the flames against her skin.

"That negligence ends this Qi'Ar."

Moki struggled against the soldiers who laughed as the flames roared into up into the darkness. She wound her head back and cracked her curved horns painfully into the soldier's face. He reeled backward dazedly as Moki broke free. She was only able to run a few steps before Mor'dari Cesynn gripped her around the neck with one hand and lifted her off the ground. She coughed and gasped as she slapped impotently at his forearm.

Wensa screamed for her and rushed to Moki's aid but was far enough back that Cesynn had time to throw Moki to the ground, unsheathe his dagger from the leather holster and hold it out so that Wensa's own momentum plunged the blade into her torso. Wensa

coughed in pained surprise.

Moki shrieked and reached out for her.

'Mor'dari!" Vo'dis Skek shouted to Cesynn. "This is an execution, not a slaughter."

"Don't worry, Vo'dis." Cesynn said, nonchalantly cleaning the blade of his dagger with the bottom of his cape. "The wound will not kill her before her execution."

"Execution?" Moki shouted and Cesynn wound up to hit her but the Vo'dis motioned for him to step back.

"That's what we do to traitors," Vo'dis Skek said.

Moki glowered at him.

Vo'dis Skek turned away to address the crowd in an unnaturally loud voice. His helmet was somehow amplifying his words over the gathered mob: "This wretched Tulean has betrayed us all by harbouring an Osk'Ynarr and raising a Mok'Ynarr within Tul. The very filth whom King Argonus cast out of Ar'mot. He would bring them into your fine city, spitting on you all and your heritage. This injustice cannot stand unanswered."

The crowd let out a malevolent screech that rose into the sky alongside the flames.

Moki thought she might vomit and didn't know what else to do instead. She stared numbly at Eo and then to Wensa who was leaning awkwardly in a seated position, blinking disbelievingly at the blood emptying from her chest wound. It all seemed like a dream.

R'nox came bounding up from out of the back alley behind the Inn, hissing.

"No, R'nox," Wensa wheezed, laboredly. ". . . Moki."

R'nox stopped and sat back on his haunches. R'nox

cocked his head to one side questioningly before slowly walking over to nuzzle into Moki.

Eo was kneeling on the dusty street, watching the flames licking up into E'thur. Moki could see his eyes and there was an unnatural calm in them. The next few moments seemed to stretch out and slow as Moki was aware of the Vo'dis positioning himself in front of Eo before raising his staff. Eo's whole body started to glow. Small pockets of light were spilling from Eo and pooling together into a sphere of light that hung in the air, seemingly unnoticed by the Vo'dis or Mor'dari Cesynn or any from the crowd of malevolent red eyes.

"It was my honour," Eo said quietly to the sphere of light before it blinked out.

In the next moment, time resumed its natural speed. Vo'dis Skek's staff began to glow and hum. Eo's form began to shrivel and fold into itself. Wordlessly, Eo became a writhing ball of skin and clothes that ground wildly against itself until it dissolved into a dust that hung in the air briefly before falling across Vo'dis Skek's sabatons.

Wensa managed to push herself up and wrap her arms around Moki and R'nox and whisper something in an unfamiliar language.

There was an unnatural whistling of air and a feeling of momentum that felt wrong as Moki tumbled forward. When she picked herself up she saw they were a far distance up the mountain on the path overlooking Tess. In the distance she could see the fierce light cast off from the inferno that had once been their Inn. She

confusedly took in her new surroundings and then R'nox made a sad whimper that took importance.

"Wensa!" Moki rushed to hold her. She was chill and her unfocused eyes were blinking lethargically.

"Ni'yon," Wensa moaned. "Take Moki to Ni'yon."

"Wensa. It's me. You're gonna be okay. We just have to . . ." she was rocking Wensa gently. She didn't know how to continue and began sobbing. "I don't know what to do. What do I do?"

"Ni'yo- . . ." Wensa exhaled in a way that kicked Moki in the chest and she struggled to breath herself.

Wensa's whole form relaxed and her head shot back. Her jaw lay grotesquely open and Moki shrieked and dropped her. Moki gathered Wensa up in her arms again, sobbing. R'nox was whining to get her attention but she hadn't noticed the Y'frit until R'nox started hissing and pulling at her trousers. He was urging her in the direction of the A'Yrr Mountain Pass.

# Chapter 6

R'nox was keeping a pretty brisk pace ahead of Moki who was lumbering behind dazedly. She stared out with unfocused eyes on the imposing cliffs that corralled them forward. R'nox had to stop frequently to switch back, coaxing Moki into keeping up. He whined and chittered impatiently.

Moki couldn't gauge how long they'd been walking. For as long as she had remembered walking, she had been in her mind replaying Eo and Wensa's final moments. When light from *the reemergence* began to swell up behind them, she realized they'd been walking the entire Qi'Ar. There had been no bend, no rest stop, or checkpoint. Just one long, straight, endless slog. She collapsed onto her knees and R'nox worriedly rushed back to her and nuzzled into her shoulder.

"I couldn't save them, R'nox," Moki sobbed. "How could I not save them? It had happened so fast. Everything was how it always was and then . . . I did this, R'nox," Moki said, hoarsely. "If I hadn't have . . . Cesynn . . ."

R'nox growled and brought his yes to meet Moki. He growled again, almost seemed to shake his head: no.

"You're right, R'nox. It was Cesynn," Moki sniffed and wiped her tears away with a dusty sleeve and quickly regretted it. She blinked away the coarse reminder of how desolate the pass was. She'd expected something, anything, by now but there was only dust and rock.

She wondered if all the other people who'd traveled through Tess and into the A'Yrr Mountain Pass had thought their trek would be this long. She eventually considered that since they'd all made their journey she could too. She'd never seen anyone who'd left Tess through the A'Yrr Pass return again once they'd left.

*And why would they?*

She'd been thinking of leaving herself since she her blossoming period where she *could've* travelled to any of the major Tulean centres to be paired; had she'd wanted to. The idea of being paired to some aged Pod'ka looking to consume ur'ka adolescence was wholly disgusting to her. She had no regrets staying with Eo and Wensa.

She was beginning to think dark thoughts about Cesynn, of Vo'dis Skek, and eventually all Tuleans. Some of the thoughts were getting malevolently violent and she caught herself. She could hear Eo's voice. She felt an odd warmth coming from behind her and could

swore that the shadows around her retreated slightly but, when she turned, the Pass was as empty as the way ahead of her.

R'nox was chirping excitedly and Moki noticed just how far ahead of her he'd gotten. She quickened her pace to catch up.

A long while later, both sides of the Pass began pulling together in front of them like intertwined fingers of stone. There was a massive door cut into the mesh of granite digits. There was writing chiseled into the stone above the door. She recognized the way the symbols were laid out. It was in the shape that represented protection. Eo said some believed the placing of symbols in a specific order would manifest various outcomes. It seemed whoever placed the symbols specifically wanted protection from Er'Ebos. She was trying to remember what Eo had been telling her about Er'Ebos and benevolent counterpart E'om but then R'nox began to growl. She heard a few rocks come loose behind her and immediately took a defensive pose.

"Come out," Moki shouted.

An unremarkable Pod'ka with a demure demeanor cautiously stepped forward. There was a side tunnel cut out of the rock that was hidden from view when she'd come up the path. Now though, looking back the way she'd came, it was imposing. She wondered how she'd missed it.

"I'm . . . uh," he stopped a good distance back when he saw Moki's stance. "There's no way past this gate."

"Oh," Moki relaxed and sat down on the ground,

cross-legged. She sighed and R'nox came to sit in her lap. "So then what? How do we get to Aq'Adez?"

"Over the years they've dug tunnel into the mountain," the

"So we can get to Aq'Adez through the tunnel?" Moki looked down at R'nox and smiled weakly.

The Pod'ka wordlessly motioned for them to join him inside the darkness of the tunnel. As her eyes adjusted to the light she could begin to make out the immense scale of the tunnel that was being excavated. There was a large cavern that cut itself outward from the entrance behind her. At the edges there were smaller tunnels that meandered away from the central cavern. Below them the cavern extended into blackness she couldn't make out as her eyes were still adjusting. Numerous hands reached out of the shadows and wrested Moki to the ground. She shouted and thrashed around in their grip. She could hear R'nox growling and gnawing on of her attackers and then an injured whimper. She looked over to see the surprised and frightened look on R'nox's face as one of the hands tossed him over the lip of the wooden barrier and he disappeared into the blackness, squealing.

She screamed for him hysterically before a heavy, hairy fist connected with her jaw and the blackness took her too.

# Chapter 7

Eo was sitting peacefully *by the hearth in the dining room of the Inn. He stoked the fire intermittently as he sipped his esper'got tea. He hummed one of his little ear-worms he knew. This particular tune was unfamiliar to Moki. As he put the poker down he moved his hand to smooth out one of the scrolls that was rolled open on the table. Eo never took a scroll out of the cellar for fear of being discovered with heretical knowledge but then she remembered he was dead and the Inn the was gone and with it all of the knowledge he'd been attempting to impart to her. She could feel the panic ripping at her, overwhelming her, until Eo said gently: "come sit, my child".*

*"I failed you," Moki sobbed starring into his face. Eo was silent.*

*"I didn't do anything . . . I . . . I just," she trailed off and could feel manic fingers of bright panic reaching out for her again. "I should've listened more closely. I should've prepared more. I should've been-"*

*Eo touched her shoulder. His appearance was gentle and kind, but his voice was grating and aggressive when he said: "I ain't never seen a blue witch!"*

# Chapter 8

A grimy, smelly hand slapped Moki on either side of her head and her eyes shot open.

"Ah, there we goes. *Not* dead, Bevs. Ya owe me a dram of Isn'got," the voice was slimy and had a vulgar texture that squirmed through her ears. "Ya been out for a while and Bevs 'ere thought the others had done ya in with the ol' one-two."

The vile Pod'ka looming over her shadow boxed in the dim light cast off from the torch hanging on the other side of the bars.

"Where am I?" Moki stammered, dazedly.

"Where are ya?" The Pod'ka laughed. "She wants ta know where she is, Bevs."

She could make out another figure on the other side of the bars but they were obscured by the flickering

torch light.

"Should we tell her?" He laughed. "Yer *home*, little ur'ka. Yer home."

Moki coughed and tried to sit herself up but a foot pressed down on her shoulder and forced her back against the cold ground.

"You ain't never gonna leave here and the sooner ya make yer peace wid 'at the better it'll be for ya. You can try an' wail and thrash and mope about for a bit. In the end yer gonna be like all the other dead-eyed *Oz'bari* shufflin' around this place," he cackled.

*The Erased Ones*.

Moki silently but angrily glared up at the Pod'ka who was pressing her against the uneven ground with his boot.

"I think ya understand," he said. "She understands. Right, Bevs?"

Bevs didn't answer but Moki's eyes were no longer adjusting to the dim light and could now see that the Bevs was the Pod'ka who'd first invited her and R'nox into the cave.

"R'nox!" Moki screamed and tried to sit up again but the Pod'ka pressed her hard against the floor with his boot.

"Oy! Now tha' ain't how things is done 'ere," the Pod'ka barked. "Down 'ere we's all slow and calm like. Right, Bevs?"

Bevs didn't answer.

"Right, Bevs?" He said again; this time more forcefully until Bevs nodded.

"Right! See, Bevs wuz like you. Bevs wuz very much like you in the beginnin'. All fiesty-like. Not no more. Eh, Bevs?"

Bevs remained silent.

"Now Bevs is the one wot brings 'em in," Connat laughed. "He's got that kinda unassumin' face ya can't help but trust, eh?"

Moki was sucking in rapid, angry breaths; each inhale pressing up hard against the push of Connat's foot.

"Ah, now I'm gonna start thinking you ain't actually understanding if you keep 'at up," Connat frowned. "Slow learners don't 'ave much fun 'ere, little ur'ka. I'm the one wot gets to see to that. Luckily, I like to learn 'em. It's right enjoyable. Give me a reason, ur'ka. Just give me a reason."

Moki saw Bevs shake his head in dissuasion from his chair on the other side of the bars. Moki tried to calm herself in response; as much as she could manage.

A large creaky door opened behind Bevs and an out-of-place looking ur'ka with strange horns entered the room holding a plate of food.

"What's all this then?" Connat barked and with a quick jerk, kicked hard against Moki's chest and turned to face the ur'ka. "Chatterbox has brought you food, little ur'ka. We ain't uncivilized here. You just have to know yer place and all'll be looked after."

As the ur'ka with strange horns stepped further into the torchlight, Moki saw a fierceness behind her *dead* facade. Connat seemed not to and Moki realized

that maybe she too could hide her fierceness in this place.

"Oster," Connat licked his lips in an uncomfortable and aggressively sexual manner before sauntering out of the cage door. He moved closer to the ur'ka who set the plate of food down in front of Bevs. "Oster, makes me so . . . *frustrated* that Bonis ain't let us Ki-join with Oz'bari." Connat bit his lip and mimed groping Oster with both of his chubby, grotesque hands. "Sadly, you're a bit too thin for me."

<<Wow. That's lucky. You're a bit too *thick* for me>>

It was very subtle and Moki wasn't sure if she was only seeing things but it looked her like the ur'ka, Oster, had responded to Connat in *Badb'Ar*; a language consisting of hand gestures. Eo had taught Moki Badb'Ar as a way to communicate while hunting when silence was necessary.

Moki let out a chortling laugh that turned into her feigning a coughing fit.

Connat came back into the cell and kicked Moki's leg. "Oy, what's so funny?" He snarled.

"I understand," Moki said. "I do."

"Okay then," Connat stiffened, unsure of how to take Moki's tone.

"Maybe I just need something to eat," Moki said rolling onto her side and wiggling her fingers beneath the restraints.

"Nah, Pen'arsol," Connat scoffed. "You wear those until the branding. Then you'll finally know . . . you'll finally have to accept. You're gonna be Oz'bari until you

die. No one ever gets out of the mines. Ain't that right, Oster."

"Connat . . ." Bevs began in a tone that made Connat turn to face him angrily.

"You 'ave somefink to say on behalf a Oster, does ya Bevs?" Bevs shook his head and stared down at the ground. "Dinna fink so."

Connat grabbed a bit of food from the tray and took a few bites but then spat it back out onto the plate.

"I'm off anyways. Bonis wants me ta give a few words of disappointment to the Oz'bari at the intersection. Seems one a'them wunt being careful 'nuff an' flooded two whole lengths a'tha tunnels. Gonna take forever ta drain off. Watch the blue witch 'til I gets back, eh?"

Connat cracked his knuckles and his neck before leaving the room and disappearing around the doorframe. Bevs sheepishly motioned for Oster to bring Moki her plate of food. As Oster entered Moki tried to gesture as subtly as she could.

<<You understand Badb'Ar?>>

The rest of her body was measured but Oster's eyes widened in surprise. She set the plate down beside Moki and when she rose to full height she responded in a way that Bevs couldn't see from his seat on the other side of the cage and she nodded.

"Hey, Oster," Bevs said in a voice that was louder and more secure now that Connat was gone. "Get outta there. You gave her the food, get back here."

<<Wait, what is this place?>> Moki gestured.

Oster turned around to exit the cell before she

could answer. She nodded to Bevs as she passed and disappeared into the tunnel beyond.

Moki looked at her plate and saw the glob of partially masticated food that she was keenly aware had recently been in Connat's mouth.

She pushed the plate away.

"You know it can be much much worse," Bevs said softly. "If you just . . . just don't make waves and it can be manageably awful here. It can also be *horrifically* awful."

# Chapter 9

Moki watched Bevs from the cage but he wouldn't look at her. Every attempt at trying to talk with him was met with some variation on *not being able to speak with the Erased Ones*.

Moki had noticed the scars on Bevs. She saw the way he'd shrunk away when Connat ever neared. She saw how his weak, curled frame was bending into itself as if for protection. Her hatred phased through pity into sadness then understanding and ending in fear.

She found herself staring at the door waiting uneasily for whatever could keep Bevs so terrified in its absence.

Oster returned first.

Bevs seemed very flustered by this and was pacing and muttering something about hierarchies Moki

didn't have any context for. Oster stared blankly at Bevs, holding her tray of food coyly. Moki observed that Bevs didn't seem to know that Oster knew Badb'Ar. The longer Oster stood silently in front of Bevs, just staring at him, the more nervous Bevs became.

"Okay, fine," he threw up his arms and began to unlock the cage. "Hurry up though, right?"

Oster stepped into the cage and set the tray in Moki's reach. There wasn't much at all on the plate. It looked like collected scraps from multiple meals but at least none of it looked regurgitated.

"Thank you," Moki smiled, which Oster acknowledged with a slow nod.

As she stood up, Oster began gesturing in Badb'Ar.

<<Where did you learn?>>

<<Scrolls>> Moki tried to gesture back subtly while she ate but saw that Bevs wasn't even watching. He was worriedly pacing and wouldn't take his eyes away from that doorway Connat had left through earlier.

<<What is this place?>> Moki dropped her subtlety and began gesturing with both hands.

<<En'aris Oz'bari>>

*The Mines of the Erased Ones.*

A blue-haired Mok'Ynarr Pod'ka emerged from the darkness from one of the other two openings, which Bevs had ignored in favour of the single doorway Connat had left through.

Oster followed Moki's gaze and then gave a confused expression before turning back to Moki and gesturing: <<Is he with you?>>

<<I thought he was with you!>>

The Mok'Ynarr easily incapacitated Bevs. He turned to them both and motioned for them to follow.

The ur'ka looked at one another.

<<Why not>> Oster shrugged.

Moki thought she noticed Oster pocketed something from Bevs desk as they left but largely ignored it. She followed behind the strange blue-haired Mok'Ynarr, blinking confusedly at something she had until very recently believed she would never see. They'd been following him around through tight passageways intermittently lit by dim, flickering torches.

"Do you know where you're going?" Moki whispered to the Mok'Ynarr who shushed her in response.

<<Does he know where he's going?>> She gestured to Oster a few paces behind her.

Oster shrugged.

Behind them they heard shouting. There was a loud, barking voice that she recognized as belonging to Connat.

"You do have a plan, right?" She said a little louder to the Mok'Ynarr sprinting in front of her. He set a frantic pace as they raced through the zigzagging, meandering tunnels cut out of the rock. The walls were braced by lumber that Moki was now noticing were sweating; almost leaking. Before she could think about it too much the tunnel dropped away revealing a vast cavern lit by dots of torches that gave the cavern an unsettlingly expansive perspective in contrast.

The dirt ground of the tunnel ended in a simple

wooden staircase that led down to perfectly manicured stonework of the kind that could only been constructed with specialized tools. In her mind there was a burst of a forgotten memory. She remembered a story Eo had related to her from one of the histories about a city that fell from the sky and had embedded itself into Te'a with such a force that the A'Yrr Mountains had swallowed it up.

A part of her mind found it amusing as A'Yrr meant *lips*.

While she was thinking, Moki had slowed her pace just enough that Oster came crashing into her from behind.

The angry voices were getting louder and every time Moki looked back, she saw the flickering lights of their torches growing in intensity until they began spilling out onto the wooden walkway, down the staircase, and down onto the manicured stones behind them.

"I *really* hope you have a plan," Moki shouted.

She could hear Connat screaming after them about all the horrific things they were going to do to them once they captured them. Moki's heart was thudding riotously against her ribs and Oster's eyes were wild with hysterical panic.

Their pursuers were now close enough that Moki could hear the wet slapping of their feet against the moist ground with a frantic rhythm. There was another wooden path that led up off the manicured stone and into another rough tunnel system that burrowed further into the mountain. The Mok'Ynarr in front of Moki

darted up the stairs; taking multiple steps in single leaps. The expansive cavern contracted as the mouth of the tunnel swallowed them up, heightening Moki's hysteria. The Mok'Ynarr took seemingly arbitrary turns when they'd reach any junction and Oster and Moki exchanged worried glances.

"Are you making this up as we go?" Moki shouted to him. "Please tell me you're not making this up as we go."

The end of the tunnel opened into another cavern but the extent of which was obscured by solid, inky darkness. The only light was bleeding out from the glimmering torches that cast inconsistent, wavy flashes of light against the wet, mossy rocks at the mouth of the tunnel behind them.

The Mok'Ynarr extended both hands and shouted something in a language Moki didn't recognize. Two luminescent orbs burst out of his opened palms and grew to encompass each fist. There was quite a bit more water in this cavern with large pools collecting in the ancient, uneven stone. The Mok'Ynarr followed the wall along the edge of the cavern until he came to a single rectangular block of stone. It looked separate from the other manicured blocks somehow. The Mok'Ynarr was running his glowing hands along a series of blocks that ran along side the larger one. They were decorated with symbols. Some of which Moki recognized from some of the scrolls but others she no idea as to their meaning.

"Oy," Connat heaved. "You gonna pay fer makin' me run. No one makes me run."

Oster stared in silent horror as their pursuers stepped out from the light of the torches and into the unnatural glow emanating from the strange Mok'Ynarr's hands.

"What's all this?" Connat was still huffing with his hands on his knees. He pushed himself up to full, imposing height. He took a few steps towards them. "Oh, this was a bad decision, little ur'ka." He glared at Moki.

"I'll deal wit'chew later, Oster. I canna' see this being your idea." Connat turned confusedly and pointed a gangly, fat finger at the Mok'Ynarr. "And 'ew a' yew?"

There was a mechanical grinding and clicking and then the large rectangular rock began to slide away. It groaned and whined as it slid along the coarse, aged stone. The stone revealed a darkened room and there was a long moment where neither party knew what to anticipate. Each stood still; waiting.

There was a crash from inside the dark room that echoed ominously throughout the cavern. A dull green glow appeared a fair ways into the darkness. The glow began to throb and grow in intensity. A clicking and mechanical grinding joined with the glowing light before a large stone hand emerged from the darkness. And then another.

And then another.

Some of Connat's party turned to flee, fumbling back down the tunnel behind them. Connat shouted expletives at them as they fled but he never took his gaze away from the stone being that crawled out from

the darkness. It was made entirely of stone connected at the joints by impossible orbs of green light. The torso of the being was supported by four limbs, each ending in stone hands. There were three arms that poked out from the top of the torso, also ending in the same dexterous stone hands. The being's head was a large, elongated cone that had six glowing dots running up the sides.

Moki looked around to Oster and the Mok'Ynarr as she noticed that Connat's attention was diverted and it would be an opportune time to escape. Oster and the Mok'Ynarr and Connat were all equally transfixed on the stone being.

The stone being's torso began to hum and the green energy began to collect into the shape of a Pod'ka face.

It began speaking and Moki recognized the sounds but not the meaning. It was an ancient language that Eo had only begun to teach her. It kept repeating the same phrase.

Oster was signing something to her but Moki didn't know the meaning of her Badb'Ar gestures either.

<<what?>> Moki gestured back.

There was a loud, viscous pop followed by a huge roiling orb of energy that the stone being ejected from itself. The roiling orb floated directly toward Connat at a speed the seemed unnaturally slow. Connat leaped out of the way and the energy ball connected with the Pod'ka behind him. The orb continued moving at the same unnerving pace as if the Pod'ka hadn't been there at all. The orb kept its course, dissolving the places it

had touched the Pod'ka. As the orb was transparent, Moki could see the expression of terror on the Pod'ka's face as his features dissolved away into a noxious liquid. It added swirling streaks of red to the green orb. What remained of the Pod'ka collapsed under its weight and convulsed against the wet stone. The orb continued on unimpeded. Others behind the wet chunks of Pod'ka had more than enough time to rush away before the orb connected with the cavern wall. The orb slowly dispersed but not before carving out a deep, curved depression from the rock that smoked and sizzled angrily.

The hum returned and Moki realized the stone being was recharging itself for another burst. She raced over to Oster and pulled her behind an outcropping of an aged rock formation. Connat was preoccupied with the stone being that had now risen to full height. It was eerily walking on its unsettling stone fingers of its lower limbs. It kept repeating the same ancient phrase that Moki couldn't decipher.

Oster patted Moki anxiously and gestured.

"Melody?" Moki said, confusedly trying to understand.

Oster shook her head in frustration. She pointed to the scars on her neck and gestured: <<Like Badb'Ar but with melody>>

Moki repeated the gesture. <<Dadb'Ar?>>

*Melody Speak*

Oster nodded. <<Dadb'Ar>>

One word in the stone being's repeated phrase

suddenly jumped out at her.

*Pass.*

The word after pass sounded like it could've been a variation on the word melody or song.

<<what song?>> Moki gestured confusedly to Oster. <<what melody?>>

There was another tactile pop and the stone being ejected another orb. It chased after members of Connat's fleeing party who were clumsily clamouring to retreat down the tunnel. Connat had also hidden himself behind a rock formation on the other side of the cavern, barking expletives at the fleeing Pod'ka.

The green energy orb lit up the inside of the cavern again. Moki noticed the same symbol reappearing along the walls.

<<It's the symbol of the Ark'fey>> Moki gestured to Oster who in return frantically motioned again to the scars on her throat.

Moki shouted out the sound of the symbol but nothing happened. She looked at Oster and Oster gestured: <<Melody>>

Moki tried a random pitch and tried to sing the sound of the symbol but again nothing happened.

The stone being began charging for the next energy ejection. The Mok'Ynarr was on the far wall of the cavern feeling the wet walls with his glowing fists. Moki saw him press his ear against the stone.

"Hey!" Moki shouted to him. "Wanna help us out here?"

The Mok'Ynarr didn't respond.

The stone being had noticed Connat first and began to move jerkily towards the rock formation he was cowering behind. Moki pulled Oster along to where the Mok'Ynarr was listening to the cave wall.

"You really need to tell me the plan," Moki whispered as loudly as she could as they pressed up against the wall beside him.

He looked back at them. "Do you trust me?" He extended his arms again.

"Come in close to me," he said and Moki and Oster hugged him tightly.

One of the last of Connat's Pod'ka who hadn't already fled saw the three and started rushing over to them; screaming and waving a big stick.

The Mok'Ynarr's hands began to glow again. A crackling orb of energy materialized around the three. It cast off a heat that Moki could feel against her damp skin. As the orb pushed outward she could see that it was eating away the rock beneath their feet. It was dissolving everything on the other side of the orb's bright sparking skin. She looked up into the Mok'Ynarr's face and saw the strain and concentration in his eyes and clenched jaw. The liquefied ground glowed and angry orange as the orb pushed outward. Moki and Oster were both hanging from the Mok'Ynarr who was now suspended by nothing, floating on the air in the centre of the orb. With a single brilliant burst, the orb expanded to quite a distance. So far that it completely dissolved the Pod'ka who'd been racing towards them. The orb's skin melted away the rock that had been

holding back the water from the natural tunnels that ate into the mountain on its way from the Or'nus Falls and out to Aq'Adez.

The strain on the Mok'Ynarr's face reached a stuttering climax before he collapsed into unconsciousness. The orb imploded and, in its absence, the waters no longer had anything to hold them back. The suction of the sudden change in pressure slurped the three up into the tunnel as the cavern began to flood. The current thrashed them around. Moki was gasping and flailing hysterically as they shot threw the black tunnels. There were only ever brief pockets of air that Moki tried to make the best of as they wound through the tunnel system. Oster seemed to be managing better than she was but the Mok'Ynarr's limp body was at the mercy of the current. She swung her limbs around through the water, trying to orient herself. She made her way towards the Mok'Ynarr and wrapped him in her arms. She angled her head with his so that their horns protected them both from the clusters of rocks that fortified the tunnels' junctions. Anytime Moki was able to see Oster it looked like she'd somehow created a green shield of energy around that held the water back just beyond the dimensions of her form.

The darkness abruptly retreated and their unprepared eyes were jolted with a violently harsh brightness that caused Moki to wince. Her eyes adjusted just in time for her stomach to feel the nauseating inertia of weightlessness and the height from which they were falling. The tunnel spit them out high above

a lake and the three began to drop.

Moki screamed and held the Mok'Ynarr tightly. Oster was silently but hysterically flailing her arms wide beside Moki in the spray of the waterfall as they fell.

The wet, painful smack of the water against their feet and knees jerked their horns together. Her head lit up in bright, aching confusion. There were a few moments where she was just floating, being pushed by force of the water raining down from above them, before she felt the weight of the unconscious Mok'Ynarr pulling her further into the darkness of the water.

She started kicking against the pull and was able to breach the surface; coughing and sputtering and gasping for air. All of her muscles burned. She found it hard to focus her eyes. Her exhausted muscles were cramping up and she sucked in a mouthful of water. She could feel herself being dragged under completely when a force lifted her to the surface again. It was Oster, holding the other arm of the Mok'Ynarr. Together they pulled him to the shore and onto land.

<<I did not like that>> Oster gestured weakly, panting hard against the shore.

# Chapter 10

Moki had gone to collect dead wood from the swamp to start a fire and when she returned, Oster and a few piles of different plants were sitting on the shore.

"Where's the Mok'Ynarr?" Moki dropped the bundle of firewood in her arms and gestured again in Badb'Ar for emphasis.

Oster shrugged. <<I went to get herbs for a poultice and he was gone when I came back>>

<<Why did you leave him by himself ?>>

<<I honestly didn't think he was going anywhere>> Oster gestured flatly. <<It didn't look like he could. Thus the poultice>>

Oster motioned towards the piles of herbs.

Moki still hadn't gotten her manic heartbeat to

slow. She slumped down onto the sandy shore and began to cry.

Oster sat down beside Moki and hesitantly gave her an awkward hug. She made sure that she'd made eye contact with Moki before signing: <<We're out. We're free. We're in Aq'Adez>>

She looked out across the lake and the scale of the A'Yrr Mountains was sobering. On the Tulean side, the mountains seemed like hills in comparison. On the Aq'Adezean side, the A'Yrr Mountains were so immense that she thought she might be sick.

She saw the waterfall they'd been shot out of, the height from which they'd fallen, and she vomited on the sand between herself and Oster.

<<that's unfortunate>> Oster gestured. <<at least we're near the water>> She splashed a hand playfully in the subtle surf with a weak smile.

Moki laughed.

At first she wanted to sleep but Oster let her know that would be a very bad idea. Eo had taught her enough about healing that Moki knew Oster was right. She let Oster make her that poultice. When they got hungry, Oster was able to catch a small, slow Unis'kis that scuttled awkwardly along the shoreline.

The humidity of Aq'Adez hugged her in a way that Moki had never experienced. It felt wonderful but part of her wondered if that wasn't just the concussion. After eating and applying the poultice Oster sat down in front of Moki and began gesturing to her to stay awake and keep alert.

<<How?>> Moki gestured, weakly.

<<Why don't you tell me where you're from?>> Oster shrugged.

"I'm from Tul," Moki said and started to close her eyes.

Oster jabbed Moki in the ribs with two fingers. <<What did you do there?>>

"Me? I was a . . ."

Oster jabbed her again. <<In Badb'Ar>>

<<I worked at an Inn. Though my real job was to 'learn the truth>> Moki gestured.

<<Truth?>>

<<That's how I know about Badb'Ar and how to track and hunt and>> Moki trailed off but then looked at Oster with sudden excitement. <<I saw you use wu'jik. Before now I thought wu'jik was just superstitious folklore. How do you know wu'jik?>>

<<I was ... >>

Oster made a gesture and Moki didn't understand. "You were a what?"

Oster made the gesture again but repetition didn't change that she had no idea what she was trying to say.

Moki started to close her eyes again and Oster gently patted the side of her face to keep her alert.

"Aq'Adez," Moki breathed and concentrated on the feeling of the balmy, moist air around them against her skin. "You know, I really thought I'd never leave Tul. I thought I'd spend the rest of my life busing tables and cleaning rooms and staring at dusty tomes and scrolls until I was an old ur'ka."

Moki looked up to the A'Yrr range again and marvelled at its incredible size.

"Part of me is amazed and full of wonder and the other part of me wishes I could just go back to the Inn, busing tables and cleaning rooms," Moki sighed.

<<How about you, Oster? Why don't you tell me where you're from?>> Moki resumed gesturing in Badb'Ar.

<<Because I don't know you>>

<<You don't *know* me?>> Moki started to laugh and her chest hurt so she stopped. She turned on her side to face Oster directly. <<What do you mean? After all that? We almost died together!>>

<<I've almost died with a lot of people and all of them died not knowing>>

"Okay," Moki said turning gingerly on to her back and staring up at the sky that was only slightly familiar. The lush, fat leaves of the swamp hung over the shore protecting them from Mōt's warmth that seemed somehow more intense in Aq'Adez than she had ever remembered in Tul.

There was a scratching in the undergrowth behind them and Oster's whole body stiffened. Moki felt the tension too but her aching body was slower to prepare. They both rose up on to their knees, sinking slightly in the sand and staring into the trees at the edge of the shore before the beach was swallowed by the swamp.

"Who's there?" Moki shouted as forcefully as she could manage while Oster's eyes darted around.

The trees rustled and Moki held her breath. There

was an oddly familiar squeak and then a blue-haired Y'frit leaped out of the foliage and raced up the sand towards her enthusiastically.

"R'nox!" She immediately began sobbing.

R'nox leaped into her arms and affectionately nuzzled his wet snout into her.

"You're alive!" She snuggled him against herself. R'nox chittered and squealed happily. His drenched, matted fur was covered in grey burs that Moki immediately began to detangle.

It looked like Oster was about to gesture something but then stopped.

"This is R'nox," Moki said, presenting him to Oster. "Wanna hold him?"

R'nox squirmed in Moki's grasp and scampered up her arm and then came to rest on her shoulder. "He's usually really friendly but I can understand why he'd be a little skittish."

<<same>> Oster nodded.

"I was so worried that I'd lost you forever," Moki cooed and nuzzled R'nox back.

Oster tapped Moki and gestured that she should eat some of the Unis'Kis meat she'd wrapped in specific herbs. It wasn't very much. Only a few meagre bites. By the time Mōt had begun dimming in E'thur, however, she felt noticeably more herself. The pain in her chest had gone. Oster had found healing er'gosi shards in the soil at the edge of the swamp and wrapped them around Moki's chest. When she pressed against the previously tender skin, the only sensation Moki felt was

the pressure of her own fingers against her ribs.

<<wu'jik?>> Moki gestured.

<<nutrition>> Oster gestured back.

Moki nodded.

<<and wu'jik>> Oster smiled.

Before it got too dark, Moki was feeling strength enough to gather wood for an improvised shelter where the beach met the swamp. Oster checked her over before Moki was given the okay to fall asleep though Oster was asleep before she was. Moki stared up at the, only partially, familiar skin of E'thur above them. Moki's old companion, Ka, was tilted slightly away from her. A little more distant. A little less familiar. R'nox was curled up at Moki's feet and his whole furry frame expanded and contracted with his breathing. Moki was very grateful he was safe. She spent the rest of the Qi'Ar staring at the rising and falling of her Y'frit's breathing and gradually drifted off to sleep.

# Chapter 11

Moki was walking across ornate *stone tiles. She vaguely acknowledged they should be ancient but were instead pristine; as though newly laid down. The layout of the complex was somehow familiar to her. She couldn't place why. There were Y'nari all around her in gaudy, ostentatious robes. They had horns that Moki associated with depictions of Qiat'Ynarr. She'd never met one herself. That's what they looked like in the scrolls and tomes in Eo's cellar.*

*She walked along the stone tiles taking in the scene. The Qiat'Ynarr around her ignored her existence completely. There was a group of Qiat'Ynarr reclining on their sides in a circular patch of grass that pressed out from the stone courtyard around it. They weren't addressing one another but were instead intently*

*looking at green orbs in their hands as they pulled on pipes of what she assumed was black leaf. She saw the sickly grey clouds bleed out of their pores, hang in the air around them, and then begin spiralling around the green orb as if by invisible wind until finally adding itself to the energy pulsing around each Qiat'Ynarr's orb. She realized this was another dream when she saw Eo among the Qiat'Ynarr on the other end of the courtyard. Only he didn't look like himself. The lines had been removed from his face as if the Os hadn't yet had time to carve them out. She thought about reaching out for him but told herself it was just a dream. Eo suddenly looked directly at her as if he could see her when no one else seemed to.*

# Chapter 12

Oster and R'nox were up before Moki who only awoke when R'nox started licking her forearm and nuzzling his snout into her arm.

"Did the Mok'Ynarr ever come back?" Moki yawned groggily.

Oster shook her head.

<<Pod'ka>> Oster gave a sarcastically dismissive gesture. Moki laughed and got to her feet.

<<So what now?>> Oster gestured.

R'nox started chirping and disappeared into swamp.

"R'nox!" Moki called after him but he returned and chirped louder and disappeared again.

<<I guess he wants us to go that way>> Oster gestured.

"Why not?" Moki laughed and stepped into the swamp.

R'nox was skittering around ahead of them. When he looked back and saw them falling behind, he slowed his pace. Though he did make a point of intermittently chirping louder for emphasis in either encouragement or frustration. Moki couldn't tell which.

"If this is Aq'Adez," Moki began, "then this must be *the Swamp of Sug'ogg*."

<<must be>> Oster gestured.

"I saw Sug'ogg's name a lot but not much was written except references to *a* Sug'ogg. Context makes me think Sug'ogg is some kind of god or deity of the early Sun'Ynarr people but I'm really just guessing," Moki said as she climbed from exposed root to exposed root, avoiding the stale, still water beneath them. "I can't believe I'm in Aq'Adez. I never thought I'd leave Tul and here I am in Aq'Adez."

<<wild>> Oster gestured.

"Maybe Sug'ogg is a place," Moki wondered and then realized she was hunger-babbling. "Sorry, I do this when I'm hungry. I get really jittery and chatty when I haven't eaten."

Oster nodded and Moki couldn't discern the tone.

They walked in silence for awhile after that with Moki consciously thinking but suppressing her urge to hunger-babble. As they traveled her mind journeyed to dark places that she had to physically shake away every now and then with a jerk of her head to each side. When she noticed it, she tried to focus instead on R'nox and

her gratefulness that he was still alive. He could very easily have been gone forever as Eo and Wensa were. He was still here and she was grateful.

R'nox had stopped moving and was leaning back on his hind legs staring out at the clearing at the top of the escarpment. When they caught up to R'nox they saw a large portion of the swamp far below had been cleared away in an intentional way that seemed ominous somehow.

Moki noticed dots of movement in the distance. She couldn't tell if they were friendly or not.

<<Sun'Ynarr?>> Moki gestured.

Oster shrugged.

An angry, fragile part of her immediately flagged them as hostile and malevolent. The feeling triggered a memory of one of Eo's lessons.

It was one of his expressive and meandering parables. He was always so excellent at crafting words in an engaging way, which became hypnotic when added to his flowing hand gestures. So much so that Moki could remember his lesson as clearly in her mind as if she were really there with him.

The core meaning of that particular parable was: if you think that the world is hostile and malevolent it will be.

R'nox smelled the intruder behind them first and started grumbling before the rustling in the underbrush alerted them.

"You're not like *them*," the intruder whispered from the protection of the swamp but didn't come any

closer. “Who are you?”

Moki waited a moment before responding. She was still feeling out what she wanted to do and forced herself to whisper back: “I’m not feeling very trustful. I hope that you understa-” Moki stopped herself and paused for a few breaths. “Okay, so since you’re still letting me talk and haven’t rushed me, I’m assuming you’re not here to hurt me or Oster or R’nox.”

<<don’t tell them my name!>> Oster gestured.

R’nox seemed to be hissing and chittering in agreement.

“You’re right. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m looking for someone who I’ve lost in the swamp,” the intruder said. “Can I come closer?”

“Just come out where we can see you,” Moki said.

A Sun’Ynarr emerged from the underbrush with their hands raised and palms open.

“I am Biorix,” they said. “I tracked my friend here. When I arrived, I noticed these Sun’Ynarr had cleared away the plants around the old temple. I didn’t see Rel but I know that he’s somewhere in that temple.”

“How can you be sure?”

“He came to the temple to find his armour,” Biorix said.

<<armour?>> Oster gestured.

“What was that?” Biorix pointed to Oster’s hands.

“Badb’Ar. We’re talking to one another in a language of gestures,” Moki said.

“Really?” Biorix had a curious expression the lingered in the pause while their mind sparked off in

the complications of this knew knowledge.

"About his armour?" Moki asked.

"Uh, yes. Yes. His armor," Biorix started. "Rel fought in the great war against Tul. They called him the Blue Knight of Eb'Eros. When he retired he returned the armour to the sunken temple here in *the Swamp of Sug'ogg*."

<<So now he wants his armour back?>> Oster gestured.

"What did she say?" Biorix wondered.

"She wants to know why he came back for his armour" Moki said.

"He's . . . he's old," Biorix said. "Rel is . . . confused but he's family and I'm worried about him. After all that's going on with the Qiat'Ynarr slavers raiding the settlements in the north and the late Warlord Kerosi's *Children of the Crimson Insurrection* threatening villagers into fighting in her army . . . and the An'Vol sightings . . ."

As Biorix trailed off, they looked visibly surprised and a bit concerned that Moki seemed to have no idea what they were talking about.

"Rel started to believe that it was *his* duty to defend Aq'Adez," Biorix said. "He left to retrieve the armour of the Blue Knight from the temple. Like I said, he's very old. He gets confused. I fear for his safety."

# Chapter 13

Biorix lead the way with Moki and R'nox following behind Oster. They got close enough to see the Sun'Ynarr were indeed clearing away the swamp. Moki now realized the complex was much larger than just a temple. They were standing on a semi-submerged ancient A'ua'ki city. The way the Sun'Ynarr were moving was hypnotically surreal. They worked in perfect synchronization with one another; wordlessly, without even gestures. They just seemed to know what the other was going to do and assisted them. It was almost like each person were a digit on a single hand.

<<that's weird>> Oster gestured. <<I don't like that>>

"Me neither," Moki whispered.

R'nox whined his agreement with them both.

"They don't seem dangerous," Biorix said.

<<I don't see any weapons of any kind>> Oster gestured.

"What?" Biorix whispered.

"We're gonna have to teach you Badb'Ar after we get your friend back," Moki said. "They don't seem hostile and it just looks like they're trying to fix up this ancient city."

There was a long, hollow drone that filled the swamp and hung with a resonance that made her teeth vibrate.

<<I did not like that>>

"That did not need a translation," Biorix said, rubbing their jaw. "That was an unpleasant feeling."

The Sun'Ynarr were calmly beginning to gather around the columns that ran in a circle just in front of the temple at the edge of the submerged city. They seemed to have set positions a few equal paces apart from one another. Once all were arranged around the circle they began to sing out a single note in unison.

Green energy was beginning to collect around the Sun'Ynarr and then it seemed to pass from each of them into the columns. The singing grew louder and the energy hummed to match their voices intensity. There was a collective pop from all the columns just as the voices hit the hard 'g' at the end of the word they'd been singing. Moki realized they were singing out the word Ogg.

*Life.*

Well, *life* was an overly reductive translation of

Ogg. Eo had explained to her that Ogg was “the essence from which the energy of life springs forth”. Moki still didn’t understand what he’d meant. She never thought she’d ever hear someone speak the word Ogg aloud but now, dozens of Sun’Ynarr were singing the word that reverberated about the swamp.

Instantly, the individual sections of energy combined into a singular dome that extended over and behind the circle of chanting Sun’Ynarr.

A new ball of energy was collecting in the centre of the energy dome. A figure stepped out from the energy ball. They were an entire torso larger than any of the other Sun’Ynarr. It set the whole perspective of everything off. It hurt Moki’s eyes.

<<so *that* happened>> Oster gestured.

Moki blinked and tried to refocus her eyes. It’s size made the rest of the Sun’Ynarr look like they were miniaturized somehow. Just as fast, there was another shift in her perception as Moki truly comprehended the size of the giant and her knees buckled.

It looked like it could’ve been some kind of giant Y’nari but it didn’t seem to have any horns. They were far enough away that they couldn’t clearly hear what the giant, hornless Y’nari was saying. Though, to Moki, it sounded like that same language that stone being in the mountains had been speaking.

R’nox started moving further down the escarpment and Biorix followed.

Moki and Oster looked at one another.

“Is this a bad idea?” Moki asked, already knowing

the answer.

<<this is a terrible idea>> Oster agreed.

# Chapter 14

They were discovered immediately but the Sun'Ynarr simply observed them. None of them rushed forward aggressively or made any action at all that could be considered hostile. In fact, they all seemed sedate; almost absent. They stared at Moki and her companions silently until one of them spoke.

"You are with Rel," the Sun'Ynarr said. "*You* are Biorix. We are pleased you are here."

"You are?" Biorix said hesitantly.

<<of course they are>> Oster gestured sarcastically.

The Sun'Ynarr motioned for them to follow. The Sun'Ynarr around them all made a sharp turn at the same time; completely unprompted in any way yet somehow they all performed the turn in unison. They stepped into the dense swamp that was still being

cleared out.

They were led deep into the sunken city. The time-worn pillars were being cleaned by teams of Sun'Ynarr wordlessly. Some of the pillars had fallen over sometime in the past and the swamp had consumed them. There were Sun'Ynarr with tools excavating the stones from the gnarled mass of vines and roots and moss. The deeper they moved into the city there was a sudden shift in the size of the columns and other structures. They approached a much larger stone gate that towered imposingly over them. A massive wall shot out either side of the gate whose once ornately decorated skin was blemished with the corrosion of being claimed by the swamp.

The Sun'Ynarr brought them to the giant, hornless Y'nari who was standing in front of the large gate. He sung out a note in a word Moki didn't know the meaning of. The gate stuttered and hummed. Around the edges of the gate ancient A'ua'ki symbols began to glow an icy blue against the aged grey stone. The gate fell away into the ground creating a stairwell that rose upward into the A'Yrr Mountains behind it.

The giant Sun'Ynarr led them up the stairs with groups of Sun'Ynarr following behind in their unnaturally synchronous way. They encased Moki, Biorix, Oster, and R'nox and corralled them up the stairwell. From farther back she hadn't noticed how unusually large each step was from the last. She found herself winded when she looked ahead and saw they weren't even halfway up the stairwell that extended

a considerable way into the mountain. The upper city looked to have been cut from the mountain in a manner that Moki could not explain using Y'nari tools. There were no chisel marks or *any* tool marks for that matter. The walls were polished in such away that they were reflectively smooth. The naturally porous quality of the stone was used as an accent (as ink on scroll) to create overwhelmingly intricate designs that extended as far as she could see. Initially, she didn't even notice the luminescent keystones at the top of each archway they passed underneath. It was when she reached the top of the stairs that she realized the light of Mōt from outside the mountain could not be extending up inside. Yet the whole stairwell was lit. As well as the keystones, there were other glowing stones strategically placed along the ceiling that cast off a soft green glow.

They saw the upper city spread out before them. The scale was incredible and Moki's knees buckled again. They were entombed inside the A'Yrr Mountain and yet it was still bright. Though admittedly not as fierce. There was a calming quality to the light.

<<how is there light when we are inside a mountain?>> Oster gestured.

"Right?" Moki had stopped walking and couldn't stop staring at the faintly glowing rooftops that blurred together in the distance creating a heaving sea of sparkling light that ended in rock at the other side. What would be E'thur was instead a domed ceiling cut from the A'Yrr Mountains above them.

They followed the entourage of Sun'Ynarr behind

the giant, hornless Sun'Ynarr along the perimeter of the city until they turned onto a straight path that lead them down into the city to an expansive courtyard at the centre of which stood a gigantic throne.

There was a massive stone throne erected at the top of an ornate staircase in the centre of the courtyard. The giant Sun'Ynarr sat down and motioned for the visitors to seat themselves. The Sun'Ynarr helped them to their seats before taking a seat themselves.

Moki felt the eyes of all the Sun'Ynarr focused on her and her companions; staring silently. The giant Y'nari had an oddly gentle voice and spoke in a slow, flowing cadence.

"We welcome you to the Court of Sug'ogg,"

<<*Court of the Soul Eaters*>> Oster gestured. <<that's not ominous at all>>

"*Soul Eaters* is an unfortunate translation," the giant Y'nari laughed kindly. "In my time, Sug'ogg meant *the Collectors of Essence*. Your gesture speak is a dialect I would very much like to better understand. You are an Osk'Ynarr, yes?"

Oster nodded.

"What is an Osk'Ynarr doing this side of *the Maw*?"

<<involuntary pilgrimage>> Oster gestured wryly. <<would not recommend>>

"And you, Mok'Ynarr?" The giant, hornless Y'nari turned to her. "I had believed all of the Mok'Ynarr had been . . ." he paused and made a face as though he'd realized he'd said something with uncomfortable consequences.

"People keep telling me that," Moki said. "I'm not sure *why* I'm here, but I'm here."

"Where's Rel?" Biorix interjected. "What have you done with him?"

The giant Y'nari made another face and said: "I think we should make introductions first so we all know how to refer to one another."

WE ARE SUG'OGG

Every Sun'Ynarr in the court spoke in haunting unison with the giant Y'nari.

"Okay," Moki shivered.

<<did not like that>> Oster gestured while R'nox growled uneasily.

"I'm Moki."

All of Sug'ogg seemed to be amused by this or at least that's the expression she interpreted on their faces when they all changed in together.

"We once knew a Moki," the giant said.

SHE WAS KIND AND JUST TO US AND WE CALLED HER FRIEND.

Moki cringed from the unnerving chorus before continuing: "This is Oster, and R'nox, and we just met . . ." Moki turned to Biorix and realized she'd forgotten their name and stared at them in embarrassed confusion.

"I am Biorix of Eb'Eros and I've come for Rel," Biorix stood up from their seat.

"Eb'Eros," the giant gave a surprised grin. "You are from the Court of the Three?"

"Do you know where Rel is?" Biorix responded with questions of their own. "When can we see him? Is

he okay?"

"Rel is our friend. He has begun the process of being collected," the giant said flatly as if that was explanation enough.

<<oh, he's being collected. good>> Oster gestured sarcastically.

"What does being collected mean?," Moki inquired.

"When the Y'nari you call Rel came to us his body was aged and frail and confused," the giant said. "When we learned it was our friend, we wanted to restore him."

"That doesn't explain what collecting is," Biorix said.

"We offered to rejuvenate his form by collecting his Ogg and regenerating his Y'nari vessel."

<<questionable>> Oster gestured.

"In what way, Oster?" The giant asked.

Oster stiffened as she'd lived so long expecting not to be understood that receiving a response was a foreign, uncomfortable, vulnerable feeling.

OUR INTENTIONS ARE BENEVOLENT. WE ASSURE YOU.

Moki almost yelped at the chorus but turned it into her next question: "Aaaaaookay, So you're saying that you're *healing* Rel?"

"It will be as if he were the same age as when he first donned his armour," the giant said.

"When can we see Rel?" Biorix said.

"I'm afraid that it will be at least another ossa or two before Rel's new vessel will be fully generated and ready to be instilled, again, with his Ogg," the giant

said. “But you are welcome to stay in our court until Rel’s rejuvenation is complete. We can provide you with food and a place to sleep and we will try to arrange some entertainment for you while you await our friend.”

Moki could see that Oster was going to gesture something sarcastic but then stopped herself.

Moki nodded and mouthed, silently: *same*.

# Chapter 15

The entertainment was awe inspiring but also found Moki apprehensive and suspicious of its purpose. The Sun'Ynarr danced and sang in an unnatural and seemingly impossible synchronicity that Moki found off-putting. When she turned to Oster, her expression showed she shared Moki's apprehension about their entertainment. The show continued well into darkness. Moki was blinking tiredly and R'nox was yawning wide in her lap. The giant kept pivoting the topic away from Rel whenever they asked. The giant kept introducing new forms of entertainment for them to enjoy while giving excuses about why they couldn't see *how* they were returning Rel's Ogg to him.

The Sun'Ynarr were being very kind to them and Moki wondered if she wasn't letting the trauma of her

recent experiences paint her perception black.

"We will show you to shelter for rest," the giant stood up from the massive, ancient throne and descended the steps to stand before them. He bowed to them before leaving the courtyard through one of the enormous stone archways that framed the circumference of the courtyard. Beyond the centre courtyard, the giant Sun'Ynarr sang that word that Moki did not know. Once again, ancient A'ua'ki script appeared against the dark stone around it. The whole time Moki had not realized that had been a door but instead thought it was a decorative relief of some kind. The stonework in the whole of upper city looked pristine with a sheen or newness as if they were cut away (and separated from time) from the stonework decaying in the swamp. Moki knew that at some point the upper city and lower city had shared this state of newness but Moki saw no weathering or aging when she looked around at the entombed city.

The giant didn't close the door behind it but instead welcomed them to follow behind him. He bowed to them again after they entered and then disappeared into the darkness of the tall ceilings, his footsteps echoing down the corridors.

The nearest Sun'Ynarr motioned for them to follow them. Moki had assumed they were going to be sleeping in the swamp in the lower city but there were clean, inviting rooms that rivalled any of the rooms she'd seen in Tulean cities. Far better than any room in Tess. Their Inn included.

R'nox fell asleep right away and Oster and Biorix succumbed to their tiredness a short while after. Moki stared at the ceiling focusing on the rising and falling of her chest as she breathed; attempting a meditative technique to bring on sleep which Eo had taught her.

The technique, *Es'Arten*, allowed for concentrated rest; as if she'd slept the entire night when she would only have to sleep half. That Qi'Ar though, Moki could not focus enough to effectively perform the technique. In the silence of the night, Moki could hear the sound of everyone else breathing. Whereas the previous Qi'Ar, she'd heard the symphony of the wind breathing through swamp and the chittering and groaning of unseen creatures sheathed in darkness. She didn't know which one was scarier.

The deadness of the sounds around her made her feel acutely aware of how they were entombed inside the A'Yrr Mountains. A wave of claustrophobic panic crashed down upon her and she tumbled out of the bed, onto the stone floor. She tried not to wake the others and was holding back screams as she writhed around on the floor reaching for the corridor beyond their room. She'd hoped the high ceiling and long corridors would alleviate some of her panic but it wasn't nearly as noticeable as she'd hoped. Mentally, Moki knew she was not trapped but something was spreading the opposite information throughout her body, which made it try to flee hysterically.

She sat against the cold stone in the hallway gasping as quietly as she could manage. She looked back into

their room intermittently to check but it didn't seem as though she'd woken anyone. She couldn't tell how long it had taken her to become calm again but it felt like quite a while. At the tail end of panic, she no longer felt tired. Even when she had calmed herself enough to try and sleep again she knew it would be impossible. There was still quite a while before morning but Moki didn't know what to do in the meantime.

Moki noticed a faint glowing at the far end of the corridor. It seemed familiar somehow and Moki slowly followed after the glow.

A faintly blue orb hovered in the air. It had a pinkish red hue that sparked about the edges. The orb always remained the same distance in front of her. She was entirely unafraid of the glowing orb. Moki noticed it was the first time she'd felt at ease in recent memory.

"-will be ready in the ossa. We've offered them a place to sleep until then."

Moki heard a Sun'Ynarr voice but they were speaking in the language of the Qiat'Ynarr.

"The Sen'Daris Er'Ebos will arrive by ossa-light," a dark voice responded to the Sun'Ynarr but the voice sounded displaced somehow, like it was coming from far away; still clear, only distant.

"With respect, We don't want *any* Sen'Daris here," the Sun'Ynarr said.

"Sug'ogg, we appreciate you wanting to keep your neutrality but sides must be taken and if you are against us-"

"We are not *against* you, Di'Voc," the Sun'Ynarr

said.

"The Sen'Daris Er'Ebos will apprehend the Mok'Ynarr and return her to Tul to face the Inquisitor," another voice joined the conversation.

Vo'dis Skek's voice was permanently lodged in her brain. Hearing it again made her body stiffen before she even processed why. Moki covered her mouth to stop from screaming.

She raced back to wake up Oster and Biorix; catching them up in hushed tones while R'nox listened by her feet. They attempted to leave quietly but every corridor seemed to end in a silent Sun'Ynarr staring at them. However, they made no attempt to apprehend them. They did not step toward them or engage them in any other way than simply watching them.

The group had continued to find their way blocked and were forced into a series of tunnels that looked like a pristine version of the ones being excavated by the Erased Ones back at the A'Yrr Pass. Moki read a symbol in the dim light that she thought might have meant *travel* or *journey*.

She'd never seen the symbol by itself. It had always been next to another whenever she'd seen the symbol before. Whenever she had seen it, the context had always been referencing movement of some kind.

In any case, there weren't any Sun'Ynarr guarding it. She guided the others to follow her into the room behind her. There were no other exits.

Biorix gasped.

When Moki turned, she saw the Sug'oggs calmly

pouring through the doorway; blocking their way three Y'nari deep.

<<this is not desirable>> Oster gestured.

# Chapter 16

WE MUST EXPLAIN

They stood before them, blocking the door with their hands at their sides, staring calmly.

"Why were you speaking with Vo'dis Skek?" Moki found their stillness unnerving as all the Sun'Ynarr were staring at them with patient and understanding eyes. "Who is Estuan Di'Voc?"

Behind Moki, Oster's eyes lit up in horror.

The Sun'Ynarr blocking the doorway did not respond. One of the Sun'Ynarr stepped forward and continued to take small, slow, gentle steps towards them.

"Stay back," Biorix warned the Sun'Ynarr, taking a step back themselves in grace but the Sun'Ynarr

continued towards them. Biorix unsheathed a dagger from under their leather armour and all the Sun'Ynarr stepped a pace back; sharing a collective surprise.

YOU POSSESS THE DAGGER OF ABSOLOM?

The dagger began to glow a bright, cool blue and the Sun'Ynarr took another step back in unison. That same mechanical groaning Moki had heard in *the Mines of the Erased Ones* announced itself loudly amid the stunned silence of the Sun'Ynarr. A green glow was added to the icy blue light pulsing out from the dagger. There was a charged crackling of energy and then an abrupt pop as two orbs appeared at the top of stone spires that Moki had not realized were sheathed inside the shadows of the room. There was another pop and a luminescent film, like oil on top of water, stretched out wide between the two stone spires.

At first, Moki thought it looked like a mirror yet it didn't reflect her image or any of the Sun'Ynarr behind her. Instead, the mirror showed a figure in robes and a dark hood. Only the lower part of the Y'nari's face was lit by the glow. The walls around the robed figure did not shine with the same vibrancy. The discrepancies between the two rooms made Moki realize they were different locations entirely. Whereas the room in which Moki and the others stood boasted walls that had immaculately polished walls, the other behind the robed figure was in disrepair and diseased with moss and lichen. The figure began to reach a hand out towards them. The hand passed through the film and assumed dimension and form. First, the tips of the

fingers, then out to the knuckles, and then a palm until the figure's whole hand hung in the air between the two stone spires. The robed figure quickly jerked back and their hand disappeared again into the film. They stared apprehensively at their glove.

The Sun'Ynarr collectively stepped forward. Biorix stepped between them with their arms crossed, forcing the Sun'Ynarr back towards the doorway.

"Go!" Biorix shouted without looking behind them.

Oster stepped through first and R'nox tugged Moki's clothes before leaping into the film.

The film snapped shut behind Moki immediately after she passed through. The two glowing spires snuffed themselves out. The energy had gone and with it the groaning and whining of the mechanism that had transported them to wherever they were.

She could hear the rhythmic drip of water and the room had a rank, musty scent that stung her nostrils. The air was pregnant with spores and pollen and Moki sneezed.

"Biorix," Moki looked around but they were not there with them.

Oster shook her head when Moki's gaze landed upon her.

<<it closed before they got through>> Oster gestured. Moki had to squint in the darkness to see Oster.

<<we have to go back>> Moki gestured to her.

<<how? we don't even know where here is>> Oster gestured.

"Excuse me," the robed figure spoke and their voice was soft but aged in a way that surprised Moki. There was a kindness in her voice that put Moki at ease. "Are you two communicating through Badb'Ar?"

Moki stared the robed figure down and let the silence in the air build and hang there until she gestured: <<where are we?>>

"I'm sorry, I don't understand Badb'Ar," the robed figure said. "I didn't even know there were still Y'nari who used it to communicate but then again . . ." she paused, "I didn't think these transporters worked. Or that a Mok'Ynarr and an Osk'Ynarr and an Y'frit would step through the transporter. Are you understanding any of this?" The robed figure stepped closer to them and removed their hood.

Oster tensed and stepped back. <<Qiat'Ynarr>>

Moki had never met a Qiat'Ynarr. She'd only ever read about them in scrolls but they weren't mentioned very often. They had broken away in the early ossa after *the Great Sundering*. The Qiat'Ynarr were the closest to Vol than any of the other Y'nari save for the Vol'Ynarr themselves who roamed the desolate, icy lands of eternal Qi'Ar they were named after. Little was written about the Qiat'Ynarr but it was libraries worth when contrasted with what was written about the Vol'Ynarr.

All Moki knew about the Qiat'Ynarr was that they had managed to cross the Labyrinth of Ur'Bos that was thought to be impassable and had become an isolationist empire that had walled itself in. The natural wall of the Labyrinth to the south and, to the north, Ci'Takal.

*The Darkness Gate*.

Ci'Takal was an epic, generational construction that spanned the whole divide between the two mountain ranges of Ur'bos. In the last age, the Darkness Gate had been built to keep the Vol'Ynarr and the exiled Ark'fey from entering Ur'Bos.

Moki couldn't understand Oster's aversion to the Qiat'Ynarr and it seemed that neither could the stranger.

"I'll not hurt you," the Qiat'Ynarr assured them, raising both hands gently. "I am Kess. Do you understand me?"

"We do," Moki said finally.

"You speak," Kess dropped her arms just a little too fast and Oster flinched. "I must apologize. I'm rather . . . excitable. But I'm harmless."

Her smile was large and genuine and Moki tried to think back to when she'd seen someone genuinely smile. She found she was caught in her mind for too long when Kess asked again if Moki could understand her.

"Yes. I'm sorry," Moki said, composing herself. "My friends and I . . ." she looked back at the transporter and remembered that Biorix was not with them.

"Can I ask you how you used this device?" Kess asked. "Where did you come from? How does transportation work? Is it wu'jik? Why are the spires dormant now?"

Moki's head was spinning. "Where is here?"

"Here?" Kess seemed surprised. "You're in At'an. I mean, the Ruins of At'an. They only uncovered this place because they were mining er'gosi and broke through a

tunnel wall. Why would you come here if you didn't know where you'd end up?"

<<it's not like we had a plan>> Oster gestured.

"What did she say?" Kess pointed to Oster's hand movements.

"She said we need to get out of here as soon as possible," Moki lied and started towards the eerily similar doorway that had existed in a more pristine condition back where they'd unintentionally stranded Biorix.

Kess clambered over the moss and lichen covered rocks that bulged and sagged in a natural dance of decay and age; herself conspicuously compromised with age. She laughed as she acknowledged R'nox who had roosted on Moki's left shoulder.

"I haven't seen an Y'frit since I was a little ur'ka," Kess beamed and went to stroke R'nox but he chittered and squirmed away, rushing down Moki's leg and taking up a pace a ways in front of them.

"I'll win you over yet, my friend," Kess laughed.

The next partially excavated room was particularly dark and Moki found herself having to stop completely. R'nox growled uneasily into the darkness.

"Did you not bring light of your own?" Kess said, amused and surprised.

Kess reached into a leather pouch fastened by thick brown string to her belt. She pulled out a single, uneven shard of crystal and held it in her hand. She whispered something that sounded vaguely Ark'fean and the shard began to shed a haunting green light that bathed the

room softly in a way that was oddly comforting. Oster, however, had her shoulders near her ears; fixated on Kess. Oster's youth and fiery sass contrasted against Kess' advanced age and congenial demeanor made Moki question whom should be cautious of whom.

<<what's the matter?>> Moki gestured but Oster didn't respond.

"What was that?" The gentle ur'ka asked.

"What are you doing in . . ." she paused and realized she wasn't in the Court of Sug'ogg any longer and that she didn't remember where Kess had said they were.

"The At'an ruins?" Kess finished for her. "I'm here to learn the truth."

"About what?"

"I'm trying to find out all I can about the physical evidence that the Ark'fey and the A'ua'ki left us after the Great Sundering," Kess said. "There's really not that much for us to go on other than the religious scrolls tell us. And a lot of what is written isn't true."

Moki stopped walking. "What do you mean it isn't true?"

"The religious scrolls?" Kess laughed. "They keep order well enough. Let's say, they keep the machinery of society moving in a way that benefits those who operate it. But as a true history? There are glaring omissions from our history that purposely exist to keep the Y'nari of Ur'Bos, Tul, and Aq'Adez from understanding our place in Asmita and the greater Te'a."

"Like the revisions of Agor the Redeemer," Moki began and Kess stopped walking to look back at her.

“How the land of Tul had once been Atlen and been ruled by the Ark’fey?”

Kess gave a knowing nod but surprised to hear Moki’s response.

“How old are you, my child?”

“I am young in Os but aged in knowledge,” Moki said.

Kess nodded again and chuckled.

Natural light began peaking through the cracks in the walls ahead of them.

“Not far now,” Kess said as she led them through the crumbled remains of rooms that had been caked with a layer of dust which had went undisturbed for countless Os. The final room had collapsed in from the ceiling and fresh earth had tumbled in, making a mound of rubble that the party could clamber up and into the warm light of Mōt. The air was hotter and thicker and tasted almost sweet.

Around the caved-in entrance to the ruins was an intricate network of wooden beams fastened taught with vines and resin. There were mining tools and other equipment strewn about. The terrain fell off sharply beyond the lip of the cave entrance, which ended in a small, hastily constructed settlement that fed the mine with supplies and housed its miners.

Moki could see the aftermath of the violence from there.

# Chapter 17

They heard whimpers and groans, but mostly silence and smoke, as they stepped up to the smoldering tents. Moki began to notice the bodies of Sun'Ynarr; some of whom were wearing leather armour of a kind she had never seen before. The bodies had haunting masks with grotesque, monstrous expressions protruding outward.

"These Sun'Ynarr must've attacked the miners," Kess said. "They killed them all."

"Where did they go?" Moki wondered aloud and immediately received an answer.

R'nox began to snarl as one of the leather armoured Sun'Ynarr appeared at the end of a row of smoking tents holding a bloodied mace.

"Over here!" A voice yelled from above them. There

was a wooden door, cautiously ajar on one of the worker pods that were built into the hill. They ran for the door and Moki helped hurry them along. The Sun'Ynarr didn't attack. He just watched them as they ran up the steps leading up the hill to the row of worker pods where a hysterical miner was waving them in.

They stepped inside and the Sun'Ynarr miner slammed the door behind him, knocking the table over, and shoving it flush against the door.

"They killed them all," the Sun'Ynarr miner's wild, chaotic eyes were red and frantic. The miner called the leather armoured Sun'Ynarr a derogatory term that Moki translated as *feral Sun'Ynarr*.

"What happened?" Moki asked as the Sun'Ynarr miner glared out into the settlement at the feral Sun'Ynarr who was standing outside silently, holding a bloodied mace.

"She's gonna tell us," the miner turned and that's when Moki noticed the unconscious feral Sun'Ynarr on the worker's bed.

<< What is going on?>> Oster gestured.

"Kess, do you know what's going on?"

Kess was blinking distractedly and it took her a moment to answer. She was thinking of some of the faces she'd seen laying dead against the soil and how she'd only just spoken to them earlier that morning.

"I don't know," Kess sputtered. "When I left for the cave at first light-"

"Will you shut up," the miner was sweating through his bloodied workers uniform. "It wasn't supposed to

be this way. We were told . . .” He paused. “I hate this swamp.”

His hands were shakily propping himself up against the window. He didn’t take his eyes off the feral Sun’Ynarr outside except to intermittently see if the feral Sun’Ynarr on the bed had regained consciousness.

“What’s going on?” Moki repeated to the miner.

“Just shut up,” the miner said. “A little ur’ka like you should just be grateful to be saved.”

<<curse this Pod’ka excrement>> Oster gestured. <<can I kill him?>>

“What? No?”

“No?” The Pod’ka miner turned and looked like he was going to strike her if she talked again.

<<*please* let me kill him>> Oster gestured discreetly but widened her eyes for emphasis.

<<no. we still don’t know what’s going on>> Moki responded.

“Aren’t you the nice Pod’ka who helped me with my pack when we first arrived from En’tis?” Kess said sweetly to defuse the tension. “Sure you are. Fendos, right?”

Fendos looked surprised and then guilty and wouldn’t meet Kess’ eyes. Instead, he turned to stare out the window again.

Oster noticed a satchel peeking out from under the bed. The leather flap of the satchel was hanging back enough for Oster to make out another uniform and she quickly gestured to Moki but she didn’t understand her gestures.

*Peace Enforcer.*

<<what is that?>> Moki gestured.

Oster pointed at Fendos. <<He's *not* a miner>>

Fendos hadn't noticed their exchange. He was still fixated on the feral Sun'Ynarr outside the window.

Moki slowly stepped over to Oster who directed her attention to the uniform in the satchel under the bed.

"Who's the Peace Enforcer?" Moki said, hoping she was using the phrase right. It seemed ludicrous that those two words would be paired together.

Fendos whipped his head around to glare at them and then aggressively stomped over to the bed. He ripped the satchel out from under the bed, tossed the flap closed over the satchel and then threw it over by the window where he stood in front of it. He resumed starring out the window silently.

The feral Sun'Ynarr on the bed began to twitch. Moki felt the moment that the feral Sun'Ynarr's delayed wakefulness caught up with their awareness of their circumstances and the panic that surged in violently afterward.

The miner was already on top of her before she was fully awake with a large, fat hand around her neck. He ripped her grotesque mask away and punched her in the side of the head. Oster had leapt forward midway into the miner's first punch ensuring the Peace Enforcer never got a second punch in.

Both of Oster's hands hummed with a charged green energy for the briefest of moments and then surged outward throwing Fendos across the room with

such force that it cracked the window. Fendos coughed and gasped painfully in a heap by his satchel, trying to collect his breath.

"Witch!" He shouted at her when he finally could.

He started to get up but she smashed him hard against the wall with another burst of energy that sent his head cracking against the wall and he was still.

<<restrain this trash>> Oster gestured.

Moki and Kess tied the Pod'ka's hands and feet as the feral Sun'Ynarr pushed herself up into a pained seating position against the headboard.

"What's your name?" Moki asked the feral Sun'Ynarr but she just stared at them with distrustful caution. "My name is Moki. What happened here?"

"She's so young. She doesn't look like a warrior," Kess said. "At least not by choice."

"If you're going to kill me, just kill me," the feral Sun'Ynarr said but it was in the ancient language of the Ark'fey.

Moki was shocked but began speaking to the Sun'Ynarr in their own tongue.

"What language are you speaking now?!" Kess asked Moki in common Sun'Ynarr.

<<how many language do you know?>> Oster gestured.

The feral Sun'Ynarr was just as surprised that Moki could understand her and silently blinked at Moki.

"What is your name?" Moki asked.

The feral Sun'Ynarr scoffed. "You destroy our home and slaughter my people and only *now* do you ask our

names?"

"We've only just arrived here. We're not a part of your conflict," Moki assured her.

"Well, *he* is," the feral Sun'Ynarr said pointing to Fendos. "I watched as they casually entered our village and began murdering my friends, my family . . ." she stared off, fighting back tears. "They took my father to become something they called the Oz'bari. *That* Pod'ka and the others with him made our Pod'ka watch as they burnt our homes and brutalized the ur'ka and the children before they marched them away into the swamp."

"I'm sorry," Moki said gently. "I am Moki. Oster and I escaped being held as Oz'bari ourselves. We just met Kess here in the ruins by this settlement."

"Eh? You said my name," Kess perked up. "What did you tell her?" Moki didn't respond and instead listened to the feral Sun'Ynarr.

"My name is Ag'Ri," she said. "This was my village."

"Your village was here before the miners came?" Moki asked.

She nodded. She explained that what Fendos had referred to as feral Sun'Ynarr were the Xen'Oggos.

*Guardians.*

The village had been a part of a larger system throughout the swamp. They had acted as the stewards of the region for generations. Only in the last few Os had they encountered the *civilized* Sun'Ynarr that Ag'Ri referred to as Kot'Akk.

*The Consumers.*

"After the Kot'Akk first arrived they tried to speak with our elders but treated us as inferior. They were disrespectful to the swamp," Ag'Ri said glaring at the unconscious Pod'ka who had just begun to groan himself awake.

He wriggled around in his restraints as he realized he was bound and began to get angrier and angrier.

Moki noticed him awakening and turned to him, yelling: "You destroyed an existing people? You built this settlement over it?"

"What?" Fendos spat, dismissively. "Of course we did. They're just feral Sun'Ynarr."

"You killed the ur'ka and children and send away the Pod'ka as Oz'bari!"

Fendos rolled his eyes and scoffed like that wasn't a big deal.

Oster's eyes widened fiercely and she screamed in a horrible, unnatural way that was more of a buzzing behind the scars in her throat. A green glow surrounded the Sun'Ynarr and lifted him off the ground where he hung, still restrained; struggling against his bindings. He began to wail and scream in a chaotic sound that surged in intensity. His whole form was writhing and thrashing against his restraints. He continued to scream as blood began to ooze out his eyes and nose, dribble out his ears, and eventually seep from the very pores of his skin until the climax of jittery convulsions when he finally became still; hanging limp in the air.

Oster unceremoniously dispersed the energy and Fendos' limp body came crashing down hard against

the floor, coming to rest in unnatural angles.

"What did you do to him?" Moki asked.

<<I liquefied his insides>>

"How did you do that?" Moki asked.

<<with great difficulty>> Oster said before collapsing to her knees, panting and gasping. <<with great difficulty>>

# Chapter 18

Kess blinked and stared into the middle distance, absently.

"You just murdered Fendos with wu'jik," Kess said in a whisper. Her eyes focused again and she saw the gnarled form of the dead Sun'Ynarr crumpled on the floor. Gore oozed from his orifices and pooled around him.

"You just murdered Fendos!" She said louder.

Oster was bent over, bracing herself against her knees. Her body was waving back and forth uneasily. She looked like she might pass out.

<<he was trash>> Oster gestured weakly. <<I just need to sit a moment>>

"I don't understand any of this," Kess said starring fiercely into Moki's eyes. "What's going on? I just came

here to research the ruins!"

Kess was becoming more and more agitated. When Moki tried to settle her, Kess flinched and retreated against the far wall of the worker pod.

"The miners here appear not to be miners at all but something this ur'ka called *Peace Enforcers*," Moki said. "They destroyed the village that existed here and built this settlement on top. They killed the ur'ka and the children and sold the Pod'ka as Oz'bari."

"How do you know that's true?" Kess said.

<<I know>> Oster gestured.

There was a knock at the window that made Moki shriek. The Xen'Oggos who'd been standing silently outside with the mace was now at the window staring at them.

"Ag'Ri, my friend," the Xen'Oggos called through the window in their Ark'fean tongue. "Are you safe?"

Moki noticed the Pod'ka's gentle eyes and genuine concern for Ag'Ri.

So did Kess.

"What did they say?" Kess whispered, slowly bringing her shoulders down and away from her ears.

"He's asking if Ag'Ri is okay," Moki explained.

"Who's Ag'Ri?" Kess asked.

"She is," Moki explained pointing to her and went to help the Xen'Oggos sit up on the edge of the bed.

She motioned for Kess to help hold Ag'Ri upright and then went to open the door for the Xen'Oggos outside.

The Pod'ka stared at them all, uneasily, before

entering; though his eyes spent the most time on Moki and her blue hair and strange curved horns.

"How does a blue witch know our tongue?" The Pod'ka asked before taking a seat on the other side of Ag'Ri and placing an arm around her.

"I am Moki. I know many languages," she said in a tone she hoped was gentle but her heart was racing and she couldn't really tell.

"Are you hurt?" He asked her tenderly.

She thought about it a moment and then shook his head but he could tell she was lying.

"I must take Ag'Ri back to the Guardians," he said and began to lift Ag'Ri onto her feet.

Moki saw the Pod'ka wince with the strain.

"Let us help you," Moki said grabbing Ag'Ri's other arm and placing it over her shoulder.

The Pod'ka looked at Moki cautiously before nodding. "I may be more hurt than I realized."

"What are they saying?" Kess asked.

Oster pocketed something from Fendos' desk.

"This Pod'ka is also injured and we're going to help take them back to their home," Moki explained.

"Where is home?" Kess asked.

# Chapter 19

As they walked, they learned the Pod'ka's name was Ri'Somat. He was having difficulties walking by himself and was no help with Ag'Ri. Moki carried her along, propped up against her shoulder. Oster and Kess staggered along behind them; Oster from exhaustion and Kess from a mixture of age and the trauma of witnessing such violence. Moki wondered why the violence wasn't seeming to affect her as much as it was Kess. Moki had only seen slightly more violence than Kess had and already she recognized the marked devaluation she held in her mind for such Pod'ka. Eo had taught her that every spark from the kindly old Y'nari, the wild animals in the woods, and even the smarmy politicians who throw their weight around were equally deserving of life.

*Do no ill; but allow no transgression.*

Moki considered that killing Fendos was part of the allow no transgression part.

Moki hadn't realized she was zoned out until Kess said hoarsely: "I really don't think Oster is doing so well."

When Moki turned she noticed how Oster's skin had changed first, then she noticed her eyes.

"What's wrong with her?" Moki gasped.

<<I am right here>> Oster gestured weakly.

"I don't know," Kess said. "I've never seen this before. This is a departure for me."

"Your friend has become infected by the blight," Ag'Ri said softly, gripping Moki's shoulder.

"Is there anything we can do?"

Ag'Ri shook her head. "The blight is something we don't fully understand. If we can get your friend to the abjurers maybe they would know something more."

"Where would we find abjurers?"

"There are abjurers at every Xen'Oggos settlement but where we are going there will be many," Ag'Ri said. "There's a blighted ones colony outside the city."

"Colony?" Moki said, surprised. Ag'Ri nodded.

"She's looking really bad, Moki," Kess said, resting Oster down to a seated position.

Oster was slowly breathing in and out with great difficulty. The sound coming from her chest was percussive and phlegmy.

<<I'm fine>> Oster gesture with a weak smile. <<A shower and a warm bed and I will reborn>>

"You can relax, Oster," Moki said. "I still think you're tough. You don't need to keep trying to impress me."

Oster snorted a genuine laugh and then winced and clutched her chest.

"Isn't there anything you can do?" Moki asked Ag'Ri who frowned in concentration and then exchanged uncertain expressions with Ri'Somat.

Moki didn't hear most of their whispered exchange but had picked out the words *gather, stem,* and *grind* so assumed there were discussing medicinal plants and herbs. At the end of their conversation, Ri'Somat started up the bank to higher land and disappeared into the swamp.

"Where's he going?" Kess wondered.

Moki shrugged.

Oster's various jagged scars decorated her exposed skin with raised, pale blue lines. Between the peaks of scar tissue were valleys of Oster's natural skin colour which had once been a soft shade somewhere between green and blue. Now, Oster's skin was gradually turning a sickly green with an inner brightness that sort of made it seem like she was glowing. Her exposed arms were pockmarked in a porous way that irked Moki. Oster's eyes had become cloudy and listless. The external vibrancy was dormant but Moki could see Oster was still there, struggling underneath.

<<Why are we stopped?>> Oster gestured. <<We're losing Mōt's light>>

"Ri'Somat will be back with something to help

you,"

<<Help me?>> She gestured. <<Maybe you guys should just leave me>>

"Absolutely not, Oster," Moki said. "I'd never just leave."

<<You don't know me. I'm not . . .>> Oster started to gesture and then paused before adding: <<You should just leave me>>

"It's definitely an experience travelling with you but, again, I feel like I'm only understanding a small section of many different scrolls that have been stitched together by an illiterate, blind Y'nari," Kess said.

<<She should write poetry>> Oster smirked.

"Are you a writer, Kess?" Moki asked.

Kess seemed surprised to be asked and stammered out a clumsy response about being a *Priestess of Mōt* before becoming an amateur archaeologist.

<<She's a wife of *old dependable*?>> Oster gestured.

It sounded like that was a derogatory term for a Priestess of Mōt, so instead Moki said: "I'm unfamiliar with the Priestesses of Mōt. Who are they?"

Kess seemed even more confused but then seemed to remember that she was speaking with a *blue witch*.

"The Priestesses serve Mōt, firstly, and then, secondly, are distributed among the cities at respective Provider Sanctuaries," Kess said.

"Provider Sanctuaries?" Moki said.

<<You have to remember, she's not from Aq'Adez>> Oster gestured.

"Stop that, Oster. While charming, Kess can't

understand your gestures," Moki gently scolded. "Conserve your strength."

"What?" Kess scrunched her face, confusedly.

"Oh, she just said that you 'must remember that I'm not from Aq'Adez'," Moki told Kess.

"You're not?" Kess somehow managed to look more confused.

Everything collapsed in on itself in that moment. Moki felt the full weight of her experiences. She'd had so little time to collect herself between all the chaos that seemed to bleed into one another. When she thought about where she started in Tess and how each event had tumbled into one another to lead her here, she threw up.

"Are you alright?" Kess and Ag'Ri asked in unison but in different tongues.

"I'm fine," she said to Kess.

"I'm fine," she said to Ag'Ri.

"Ri'Somat should be returning soon," Ag'Ri, herself injured, reassured Moki.

They waited a little longer than Moki had hoped they would have to before Ri'Somat appeared again at the top of the bank. He slid down the wet soil with an arm of herbs and leaves and something in his right hand that Moki thought looked like an animal heart. They combined the ingredients on the top of a large flat piece of tree root and began to grind them together until they formed a viscous, purple paste that didn't look particularly appetizing.

Wensa used to joke that that was the sign of a good

poultice.

*If you wouldn't want it to touch your tongue going down, you'll come up feeling strong.*

It sounded better when Wensa said it in the Osk'Ynarr language of Ble'Cyn.

They rubbed the poultice on Oster's lips and on her forehead before adding some to a water skin and making Oster drink it.

They waited awhile and then Ri'Somat said a few words with an er'gosi shard pressed to Oster's head. Ri'Somat and Ag'Ri exchanged worried glances before ending the ritual and giving Oster fresh water. Ri'Somat began slicing bits off what had looked to Moki like a heart. He whispered some words over the slices before turning back to Oster and feeding them to her.

Oster fell asleep shortly after and Moki looked to Ag'Ri with worried apprehension but Ag'Ri nodded gently to her.

"It will work soon," Ag'Ri said.

"Or it won't," Ri'Somat added quietly with his back turned.

Ag'Ri and Ri'Somat exchanged another tense expression before he began chanting and pressing his hand on Oster's forehead. It started to glow an icy blue like Biorix's dagger had before the transporter activated. The glow underneath Oster's skin began to shift ever so slightly from that bruised green to something more akin to stagnant, sitting water.

The glow receded and Ri'Somat stepped back.

"We'll have to wait until she wakes up," Ag'Ri said

after a long silence. “We can’t move her like this.”

Ri’Somat let them know he’d spotted a place for a camp at the top of the bank a ways deeper into the swamp. Moki, Ri’Somat, and Kess helped take Oster’s limp form up the gummy soil of the embankment and into the camp before coming back to help Ag’Ri.

The Xen’Oggos had a peculiar way of starting fires that Moki admired intellectually but was emotionally ignoring for the chaotic recall of past events that were consuming her attention. *That* and the fear of theoretical future events she was concocting in her mind, which she’d already decided where going to be traumatic themselves.

Ri’Somat left again, hugging his side and moving slowly as he disappeared into the foliage. Ag’Ri said he was going to collect food for them and Moki nodded in acknowledgment, distractedly.

Oster was sleeping on her side and shaking weakly. Her skin was moist with a layer of sweat but her hue was slowly returning to its original colour. Whatever the Xen’Oggos had done, it seemed as though it might be working.

Kess was seated beside her, warming her hands on the fire. The swamp was already pretty shady but now that they were bathed in Qi’Ar the darkness pressed in aggressively against the light of the fire at the centre of camp.

No one was talking and the sounds of the swamp felt overtly threatening and unfriendly. She’d been so concerned with the varied forms of Y’nari she’d

encountered since leaving Tul that she'd almost forgotten wild animals could *also* be a danger. She wished she had her bow.

There was a gurgle and rustling somewhere in the darkness followed by a distant howl. Moki knew the sounds couldn't be connected to one another but it only made her worry about the sheer number of things that might be hiding within the inky blackness beyond the warm glow of their fire.

R'nox had come up beside Kess, and nuzzled in against her. Looking up at her with care and concern.

"Thank you, my little Y'frit," she smiled weakly. "I knew I'd win you over somehow. I appreciate your affection."

Moki smiled, weakly.

"Good, Y'frit," Moki said and R'nox scurried over to nestle into her. "Where did you find an Y'frit?" Kess asked. "If you don't mind my prying."

"He was a gift from . . ." Moki paused and remembered Eo's face, his smile, his love, and then his form slowly contorting and pressing into itself. "It was a gift."

Kess nodded and didn't press further.

"I only ask because I've never seen an Y'frit without a red stripe along its tail," Kess said. "Not that I've seen a lot of Y'frit."

R'nox kind of chirped as though he were offended.

"I was told that they were from Ni'Yon," Moki said.

"Now *that's* a name I haven't heard in a long time," Kess said. "Where did you hear about Ni'Yon?"

"I'm . . . I'm supposed to go there, I think," Moki said, stroking R'nox's blue hair.

"Well, that will be something of a trek," Kess laughed but saw the look on Moki's face and stifled it with an awkward cough.

"Why? Is it far?" Moki asked.

"I don't even know where to start looking except that it's said to be deep within the flames of Ovin," Kess said. "Everything that was ever written about Ni'Yon is from a time long before the Ark'fey and the A'ua'ki. Before the destruction wrought by the Green Wave."

Moki looked disappointedly into the fire.

"Why do you think you're supposed to go there?" Kess asked.

"Before . . ." Moki was going to say Wensa's name and found it stuck in her throat, bringing tears to her eyes. "Someone I loved told me that I needed to find Ni'Yon before I left Tul."

"You're from Tul?" Kess asked in surprise. "How did you get through the A'Yrr Mountains? I thought the Kir'Sagis Aq'Adez destroyed the pass."

"It seems there are people who are trying to dig underneath it," Moki looked over at Oster who was still shivering, laying on her side. "We found a shortcut and beat them here."

"Are there many Mok'Ynarr in Tul?" Kess asked. "We always heard that Tul was pretty . . . homogeneous."

"That's a very apt description of Tul," Moki laughed. "I had always thought I was the *last* but . . ." Moki continued to play with R'nox's blue hair and pursed her

lips; thinking, remembering, “Oster and I would still be Oz’bari if it weren’t for a mysterious Mok’Ynarr who saved us.”

“Oh?” Kess said, moving closer to the fire and to Moki.

“They were using Oz’bari to excavate what looked to be a city much like that of At’an where we met you. Luckily there were natural tunnels that bore through the mountain and the Mok’Ynarr used some kind of wu’jik to break into one of the tunnels. The waters pushed us out into Aq’Adez and now we’re here.”

“Where’s this other Mok’Ynarr?” Kess asked.

Moki shrugged. “He left us shortly after. I never even got his name.”

A rustling in the swamp behind Moki made her whole spine snap erect. She whipped around to see Ri’Somat step into the light of the fire holding a fistful of herbs and a pair of large rodents in the other hand.

# Chapter 20

Oster's cheeks looked gaunt and slightly withered in a way that still concerned Moki, though she was looking quite a lot better than the ossa before. Ri'Somat was still hugging his ribs with one arm but was keeping a moderate pace alongside them. Moki was propping up Ag'Ri as they trudged through the swamp. The weight of the wounded Xen'Oggos was exacerbating her already sore muscles. Moki had not eaten anything since Wensa's daily special at the Inn aside from the meal with Sug'ogg and the herbed rodents they'd shared the previous Qi'Ar.

"How far away are the Guardians?" Moki asked.

As if to answer there were cries of wild voices in the swamp that shocked the relative silence into vociferous agitation. Moki almost dropped Ag'Ri but readjusted

her grip under her arm to keep Ag'Ri standing. Three Sun'Ynarr leapt out of the foliage to block their path forward and when she craned her head around to their flank she saw that four more were racing up behind Kess and Oster.

Ri'Somat silently rose a fist to signal Moki and the others to stay where they were. He spoke in cautiously calm words to the Sun'Ynarr. She heard the phrase *blue witch* and *blight* as well as *the Guardians* but they were speaking incredibly fast. Moki wished she'd paid more attention when learning ancient Ark'fean from Eo. There was a lot that she had wished she'd taken more seriously when she'd had the chance. The tense, silent moment seemed to hang there for entirely too long before the Sun'Ynarr lowered their weapons and seemed to relax their stances enough for Kess to begin to lower her shoulders from her ears.

"Who are they? Are these the Guardians?" Moki whispered to Ag'Ri.

Ag'Ri shook her head. "These are Ix'Arki. We had to go through their lands to get to the Guardians but they . . ."

"What?"

"They're not Xen'Oggos," Ag'Ri said.

"Are they hostile?" Moki asked.

"I hope not," Ag'Ri whispered. "To the Kot'Akk, there is no difference between Ix'Arki Sun'Ynarr and Xen'Oggos Sun'Ynarr. Since you came at a time when we share a common enemy, I hope the Ix'Arki are friendly."

Moki noticed that the leader of these Ix'Arki was

staring her down while he conversed with Ri'Somat. His gaze was unnerving and Moki swallowed hard.

"I hope they understand there is a difference between us and the Kot'Akk," Moki whispered.

"They seem to be very concerned with the one you call Oster," Ag'Ri said.

"Oster? Why?"

"They can tell she's been affected by the blight," Ag'Ri said somberly. "There are no blight colonies in Ix'Arki territory."

"Why not?"

"Because they kill them before they can infect others," Ag'Ri said flatly.

Moki trained her ears harder on Ri'Somat and his conversation with the Ix'Arki. He was asking them for safe passage through their territory but, from the words Moki could pick out of their conversation, it was wasn't going very well. Their voices kept building until they were shouting at one another. Ri'Somat stepped in front of the Ix'Arki, blocking them from coming any closer to Oster. They seemed to know Ri'Somat was injured and wouldn't be much of a deterrent. The closest Ix'Arki unsheathed his sword at his side with one violent motion that saw the hilt smash into Ri'Somat's stomach, toppling him over onto the moist soil. The Ix'Arki began to aggressively stomp toward Oster who was groggily bobbing her head as though it were too heavy to keep upright. Moki stood up and assumed a fighting stance but Ag'Ri gripped her arm and shook her head at her.

R'nox jumped between the encroaching Ix'Arki

and Oster, snarling. The Ix'Arki stopped for a moment in confusion before breaking into a laughing fit. Moki could swear that R'nox was glowing. He seemed larger than he usually was somehow.

A massive claw reached out from inside the swamp and gripped the nearest Ix'Arki, jerking him forcefully into the dense foliage as he thrashed impotently. Moki had seen the size of the monstrous claw and blinked dazedly while her mind connected just how large the hidden beast must be to possess a hand of such immense size.

Ri'Somat had already composed himself enough to help Kess lift Oster to her feet but winced with the strain. Ag'Ri tugged on Moki's shoulder to pull her out of her thoughts. The Ix'Arki disappeared into the swamp after their stolen companion. A chorus of hysterical, pained screams were silenced abruptly.

Ag'Ri shouted a name out to Moki that she hadn't heard before but from context was pretty sure it meant: *swamp monster*.

She could hear its dark, throaty, grumbling behind the leaves, roots, and vines but could see nothing of the monster. Ag'Ri pulled at her arm again trying to get her attention. She barked a phrase Moki couldn't translate but knew it meant: *run*.

She started forward but was wildly out of sync with Ag'Ri and the both of them fell forward, sliding down the wet soil until the momentum of their entwined forms pulled them over the edge of an embankment that Moki hadn't seen was there. Hanging branches and

fat roots had hid the slope from their trail.

She heard Kess' voice scream her name but it sounded muted and distant. They kept tumbling and snagging their clothes on jagged pieces of swamp that jutted out from the soft soil. She landed hard against the ground at the base of the embankment but the force of their tumbling opened a hole and they fell another considerable height before finally coming to rest at the base of a perfectly cylindrical tunnel running off into blackness on either direction once it escaped the light coming in the collapsed roof above them.

Dazedly, Moki stood up and stared up at the mouth of the hole that was far too high above them to climb out. The walls were unnaturally smooth.

Ag'Ri was wheezing painfully and tried to sit herself up. She said something again but Moki didn't recognize the words.

"Oster!" Moki shouted. "Kess! R'nox!"

"Quiet," Ag'Ri scolded, worriedly. She said the words again Moki didn't recognize.

The walls seemed intentioned somehow as if something had burrowed the tunnel from the swamp. There was the odd blemish of a scale-like pattern that subtly pockmarked the otherwise smooth walls.

A small green dot appeared beyond the reach of what little light there was filtering down from the hole above them. It started to grow larger. The tunnel seemed to vibrate at regular, rhythmic intervals. As the green dot grew the vibration became more violent. Then, the distant hissing and clicking jerked Moki into

realizing the glowing was actually the very creature that had created the tunnel.

"We need to get out of here," Ag'Ri shouted.

"We can't!"

"Help me up!" Ag'Ri shouted again and Moki raised her up and threw Ag'Ri's arm over her shoulder.

"Now what?" Moki said.

The green glow was now half the size of the tunnel itself and still growing. The walls of the tunnel were vibrating and casting off wings of dust that fluttered in and out of existence as they passed through the light stabbing down from the hole above. The hissing and clicking sound was crawling underneath her eardrums, licking them with a wet slimy tongue.

Moki shivered.

Ag'Ri had been talking to Moki but she couldn't focus on anything other than the ominous glow growing in the darkness.

"Moki!" Ag'Ri shouted. "We can't climb out so we need to go *that* way!" She pointed to the darkness behind them.

"But I can't see!" Moki cried. "We won't see where we're going."

"It's a tunnel. If we stay in the centre and keep going as fast as we can there must be an exit," Ag'Ri said.

The sound was still molesting Moki's ears and the thought of what it felt like to be devoured flung her limbs into motion and almost tripped over Ag'Ri.

"We have to do this together," Ag'Ri said in a calm

tone that Moki suddenly recognized and it began to calm her too.

"Okay," Moki said. "Together."

They took a few awkward steps into the darkness but after a few strides were working in tandem at an even rhythm. Moki looked behind them to see the small patch of ossa-light from where they'd punctured the tunnel shrinking. Looking back had almost caused them to topple forward. After regaining their footing and rhythm, Moki decided not to look back again.

As they couldn't see anything anyway, Moki had begun closing her eyes and focusing on the feeling of each footfall and the sound it made. She could feel the way each thud swatted out and slapped against the tunnel walls. She could hear that the tunnel was a cylinder. The curve of the tunnel against her feet told her how close they were to the centre of the tunnel and if their path veered to either side ahead. So far any turns had been so gradual that they were able to feel when the turns were coming as they ran.

Moki hoped there'd be an opening soon but there was nothing ahead of them but blackness. The vibrations were so loud now that it felt like the walls were kicking back against their feet as they ran. Moki opened her eyes and the walls on either side of the them had begun to glow green and they could begin to make out the hard, smooth walls. Extremely faint at first but then they began seeing the shadow of their entwined forms in the tunnel in front of them.

Moki's muscles burned and her heart was slapping

madly inside her chest as their shadows grew larger and longer in front of them and the green glow became brighter and brighter.

Moki looked behind them and shrieked. The creature was almost upon them. It raced towards them screaming and hissing and clicking. There was a ring of green that surrounded the creature and in that moment could see it was melting the tunnel in front of it as it bore through. She could feel the heat coming off of it even from a distance.

Looking back had thrown off their rhythm and they both came crashing down against one another, sliding along the hard tunnel floor. Their whole bodies were vibrating as the creature neared.

Ag'Ri was starring at the creature with an expression that Moki read as acceptance. It kind of reminded her of Eo. When Moki looked back at the creature she could make out its wide maw spanning the breadth of the tunnel. She could see into its mouth and the rows and rows of phlegmy teeth.

She felt a pang of hopelessness and in the next instant she there was a cool blue light that kissed the sides of the tunnel and  something shifted in her mind. She remembered something. Something she couldn't have known before and knew she had not known. Though now, she couldn't remember a time she *hadn't* known.

She locked her arms and shouted a word she'd never heard before but somehow had. Sharp, blue energy collected in a sheer wall in front of Moki

and Ag'Ri. As the creature crashed into it, its flesh began to crack and sizzle and spark. The hissing and clicking turned into pained shrieks followed by a sad droning and whimpering that had a slow, vibratory wobble. Moki could sense surprise in the creature and something akin to fear and then it began retreating the way it came. The glow dimmed and the vibration of the walls fading until the green dot disappeared and they were left in the sharp blue glow of the sparking energy around Moki's arms.

Ag'Ri was staring up at Moki in surprise: "You are a wu'jikarr?"

# Chapter 21

They sat in silence for awhile, catching their breath. Moki moved over to pick Ag'Ri up but she raised her hands to stop her.

"Wait," Ag'Ri said. "How do you know wu'jik?"

Moki blinked and thought about it for awhile but couldn't understand how it had happened.

"I just," Moki paused. "I just *knew*."

"Why didn't you use it before to help Ri'Somat and the others?"

"I don't think I knew it then," Moki said. "I don't think I know it now. I don't think I could do that again."

"So you used wu'jik accidentally?"

Moki shrugged. "Maybe?"

Ag'Ri accepted help when Moki offered again and the two started back down the tunnel at a shared

rhythm.

"What was that shield thing you did?" Ag'Ri asked. "It cast off a light. It might help us see if you could do it again."

"I'm not sure I can. I . . . I think something helped me do it," Moki said.

"Something helped you? What?"

"I don't know," Moki said. "I'm just glad it did."

Moki looked behind them to see if the monster might return. Since they were moving at a much slower pace she was able to stare back for longer without crashing in a tangled heap.

"It's called a Guris'ak," Ag'Ri said. "I don't think it's coming back."

"Good. I'm not very fond of Guris'ak," Moki smirked.

Moki stopped breathing the moment there was any light in front of them. She realized she hadn't been and sucked in a deep breath. The light wasn't that ominous green of the Guris'ak but instead the warm, familiar ossa-light of the swamp. They were both invigorated with hope and their pace seemed to naturally pick up. The light was growing along with their anticipation of escape. The feeling of the swamp air rushing at them as they clambered out the mouth of the tunnel gave them short lived burst of relief until the large spears of a group of Ix'arki stepped out of the foliage to greet them.

The Ix'arki wouldn't speak to them and instead treated them more like cattle. The Ix'arki corralled them into step and led them to their settlement which

wasn't all that far.

There were no signs of Ri'Somat or Oster and the others. The Ix'arki seemed to treat Ag'Ri with mild disdain but mostly disinterest. Moki however was being looked at as some obscure relic or a fabled beast of myth.

Moki tried to speak with them but they wouldn't address her. They were speaking in a language that Moki had never heard before. It wasn't the dialect of Sun'Ynarr the other Ix'arki had been speaking when talking with Ri'Somat.

Moki asked Ag'Ri if she knew what they were saying but she quietly told Moki not to interact with the Ix'arki.

They brought Moki and Ag'Ri to the centre of their settlement which was not at all what Moki was expecting. It looked to be another ancient complex like that of At'an but much smaller; and far better maintained and manicured. They placed Moki and Ag'Ri in a barred cell that faced an open courtyard. They closed the entrance and weaved branches through the bars, sealing them in.

"This tribe of Ix'arki are said to kill any who venture into their territory," Ag'Ri said softly to Moki when she was sure the Ix'arki weren't paying attention. "They are rumoured to eat the trespassers."

"Rumoured?" Moki breathed.

"It's not like many come back," Ag'Ri said dryly.

"Right," Moki said.

Moki heard screams from another cell she couldn't

see; there was an alter of some kind blocking her line of sight.

Two Ix'arki pulled a Sun'Ynarr into view who was struggling impotently against them. He looked like a captured Peace Enforcer. His uniform was muddy and torn and deeply worn. He was screaming expletives and derogatory terms for Ix'arki that they didn't acknowledge.

The Ix'arki were moving in a very measured, dignified, and orderly way that Moki found off-putting considering what they were doing. They stepped very matter-of-factly around the courtyard. Two of the Ix'arki in highly detailed robes each clasped a tray from the altar. They returned to the Peace Enforcer who they'd forced to kneel down on the ground at the centre of the courtyard.

The eyes were first.

With one implement, an Ix'arki in ceremonial robes stabbed out both of the Peace Enforcers eyes. Two armoured Ix'arki held the screaming Sun'Ynarr in place. The Sun'Ynarr's fingers were taken individually with separate ceremonial knives of a color corresponding to the plate that the ritual leader placed each finger. They were each brought to ten altars with the corresponding colour.

Ten Ix'arki stood in front of each of the smaller altars wearing robes the colour of their altar. The ritual leader said something Moki did not understand. Each of the Ix'arki stepped to the centre of the courtyard and held out one of the Sun'Ynarr's disembodied digits.

The Sun'Ynarr was sobbing, hoarsely and only then did they slit his throat. However, that too was drawn out with a very specific ceremonial knife that was brought in by three Ix'arki: one at the hilt, one at the center and one at the end of the blade. The knife was presented it to the ritual master.

Moki pressed herself against the bars at the back of the cell in terror. An old Pod'ka gently touched Moki's hand to alert her of his presence. Moki almost shrieked but she saw his finger pressed to his lips and his kind, friendly (somehow familiar) eyes.

"Moki, my friend," the old Pod'ka said. "I don't think you should stay here any longer."

There was a loud crack of energy and the row of alters exploded throwing some of the Ix'arki clear across the courtyard landing at unnatural angles; mangled and contorted. The Ix'arki started shrieking and racing around in confusion. Two more explosions snapped off in rapid succession. The guard seemed to completely forget that Moki and Ag'Ri were in the cage because he bolted off in the direction of the explosions.

The old Pod'ka came around and untangled the branches that locked them in and swung the door wide.

"I think we should leave, my friend," the old Pod'ka said.

# Chapter 22

They watched the Ix'arki settlement fall to the Peace Enforcers as they followed behind the strange old Pod'ka. Moki's mind was still humming in horrified over-stimulation after witnessing the execution and ritual consumption of the Peace Enforcer right in front of them. The screaming and explosions were muted and unimportant to Moki as she dazedly helped Ag'Ri follow the strange, old Pod'ka out of the Ix'arki settlement and into the swamp.

"This way," the Pod'ka said in a cheery, jovial tone that was uncomfortably jarring in juxtaposition to the chaos behind them. The sounds of the conflict began to quiet and she could hear the Pod'ka humming a tune happily. Moki couldn't get her mind away from the blinded Peace Enforcer's screams as they sliced off his

fingers.

The Pod'ka was still humming his tune and then Moki asked: "Where are we going?"

"To meet our friends," the Pod'ka said and then returned to humming.

"We need to find Oster and the others," Moki said. "Oster was sick."

"Oh Oster! Yes. Of course," the old Pod'ka said. "And the others."

"You know who I'm talking about?" Moki asked, surprised.

"They're my good friends," he said.

"You met them? Where are they?" Moki asked.

"Well, no. Not yet, but I *will*," he said.

"What is your name?" Moki asked. "How do you know my name?"

"We are good friends," he said.

"How can that be? I've never met you before," Moki said.

"Oh, yes. Of course. Not yet," A'tok said. "I am A'tok."

"Of course," Ag'Ri said, dryly but then realized that sounded rude and she asked: "Do you know me?"

"I do not, unfortunately," A'tok admitted. "You must've stayed behind."

Neither Moki or Ag'Ri knew how to respond to the strange Pod'ka so they continued following A'tok through the swamp in silence.

"So what's wrong with the Ix'arki?" Moki asked after the extended silence had become too much.

"What do you mean?" Ag'Ri asked.

"Why do they eat other Y'nari?" Moki asked.

"We don't know much about the Ix'arki," Ag'Ri said. "Aside from being fiercely isolationist we know that they follow the deity Car'toxis."

"Car'toxis? The A'ua'ki god?" Moki said surprised.

"Follow?" A'tok shrugged. "I wouldn't say that."

"I always thought that the ritual eating of trespassers was just a story the Xen'Oggos told children to keep them from venturing into Ix'arki lands," Ag'Ri said, somberly. "I guess its real."

"It was very real to the Peace Enforcer," Moki said.

"Indeed," A'tok laughed and then went back to his humming.

Moki stared at the old Pod'ka slogging happily through the underbrush in front of them.

"Aren't you scared?" Moki asked. "How are you so calm? Weren't you worried about being captured and eaten yourself?"

"Oh no. Only when I meet myself shall I die," A'tok said. "It's a ways off yet."

"Oh," Moki exchanged confused looks with Ag'Ri who was leaning against her as they walked.

Ag'Ri was starting to walk on her own with more stability but Moki stayed by her side to assist her when she needed it.

"How did you know we were there? Why did you help us?" Moki asked A'tok.

"You're my friend," A'tok said, incredulously. "Friends help friends."

"I see," Moki said.

There was an opening in the swamp. Oster, Kess, R'nox, and Ri'Somat were waiting for them in the clearing. R'nox came bounding up and jumped onto Moki, climbing up onto her shoulder, and nuzzling into her neck.

"My friends!" A'tok said enthusiastically as they joined them.

Ri'Somat jumped up from his seated position and winced as he forgot he was still injured. He rushed as fast as his aching body would carry him over to Ag'Ri and embraced her.

"You are okay?" Ri'Somat looked into her eyes through tears and embraced her again.

"I am," Ag'Ri assured him.

"I thought . . ." Ri'Somat started but couldn't choke out anymore before bursting into tears.

"I am safe thanks to Moki," Ag'Ri said. "We encountered a Guris'ak."

"A Guris'ak!" Ri'Somat gasped. "But how did you . . ."

"Moki saved us with wu'jik," Ag'Ri said.

<<wu'jik?>> Oster gestured, amused.

She still looked pretty ill but not like she had before. That was encouraging.

Ri'Somat turned to Moki: "You can use wu'jik?"

"Okay," Kess interrupted. "So far no one has said *anything* that I can understand. What in loving Mōt's name is going on? What happened to you?"

Moki turned to Kess and embraced her. She began

to explain to her, in a shared language, about what had happened since they had been separated.

It was getting dark again and Ri'Somat suggested that instead of continuing their trek, they should camp the Qi'Ar and wait until morning. Ag'Ri agreed and Moki wasn't going to disagree. Her whole body was still buzzing with adrenaline. The lack of food was making her lightheaded. She didn't think she could walk any more even if they'd wanted to. Moki dazedly sat at the camp trying calm herself and nodding away questions from the others as to whether she was okay.

A'tok had left briefly but returned with firewood before Moki had realized he was gone. They made a fire as the ossa-light faded completely. The warmth of the fire was a welcome distraction from the oubliette of darkness in her mind that was cycling through the traumatic memories that cluttering her thoughts.

Ag'Ri and Ri'Somat had prepared some food. Moki hadn't asked what it was and just began eating. She wasn't even aware of the taste as she was absently chewing and thinking.

Kess could see how distant Moki was and took the opportunity to remind everyone that she had once been a Priestess of Mōt and a pretty good storyteller. She offered to tell the party an after meal story and no one objected. Ag'Ri and Ri'Somat couldn't understand her words, but her expressive brand of storytelling captivated them all the same.

"Once, there was a single deity whom the A'ua'ki had captured in a ceremonial artifact, *the Er'osys*, in their

journeys above in E'thur. Before their arrival, wu'jik did not exist on Te'a. The A'ua'ki brought wu'jik with them. They were able to wield of its energy through the help of the ceremonial artifact, the Er'osys, as a focus. For many Os the A'ua'ki ruled Te'a as gods over the seven tribes of Y'nari. Most were benevolent but some of the Y'nari were beginning to see the A'ua'ki as exploiters and tyrants instead of the benevolent rulers they claimed to be. There was an Y'nari named Tarkondrius who freed the single god, Er'gosun, by destroying the Er'osys. His actions brought about *the Green Wave* that destroyed the empire of the A'ua'ki. Scattering the survivors deep into the darkness of Ur'Bos and into Vol in the north. Others, into the scorching heat of Ovin in the south. When the Er'osys was destroyed, the single god, Er'gosun, shattered along with it. Becoming 14 lesser gods. Corruptible gods. Gods who were angry and resentful of their imprisonment and exploitation by the A'ua'ki. The dark god, Er'Ebos, gradually convinced eight of the other gods to follow his malevolent compulsion to destroy all of Te'a in vengeance for Er'gosun's exploitation and shattering. The light god E'om, leader the benevolent gods Mōt, Ka, and Arkus, sought to re-unify Er'gosun instead of seeking revenge. Two gods, Sug'ogg and Car'toxis, refused to take sides," Kess said.

Moki perked up when she heard mention of Car'toxis.

"Sug'ogg wanted the tranquility of isolation and Car'toxis . . . well, Car'toxis is chaos; aligned only with themselves. Neither good nor evil but equally capable

of gentle benevolence as cruel malevolence."

"There are some errors in that," A'tok said. "But that's an acceptable retelling.".

"I mean, I'm not done," Kess laughed. "This is the preamble; the introduction to the story of *the Great Sundering,* the fall of the Age of Empires and the birth of the Age of Chaos."

"What made you leave?" Moki asked Kess, interrupting the story.

"The Order of Mōt?" Kess paused and thought about it. "I mean, it wasn't necessarily my choice," Kess said. "I asked questions that they didn't want to find answers to."

"Question everything," A'tok said. "That's what I always say."

"What kind of questions did you ask?" Moki inquired.

"Heretical questions," Kess said. "Questions that would contradict some of our most deeply held beliefs and the validity of our sacred texts. When they chose not to answer my questions and instead exiled me from the Order, I realized they were not concerned with truth; only control. That's when I started my own search for truth."

<<Any luck?>> Oster gestured.

"Huh?" Kess asked.

"And did you find the truth you were looking for?" Moki asked.

"Only more questions," Kess said.

# Chapter 23

Moki stayed awake after the others went to sleep. She stared into the embers of the fire and felt the soft heat against her exposed skin. She was thinking about how she'd wished for adventure all those Qi'Ar ago, at the Inn; staring up at Ka's dim light, naively wishing to escape a life she desperately wished she could return to. In her imagination she'd expected those adventures would be exhilarating and full of wonder. In reality, she felt the malevolent chaos like an acerbic film that swaddled her darkly. She wished she could sleep and awake back at the Inn with Eo and Wensa busing tables and learning the knowledge hidden in the tomes and scrolls in the cellar. She remembered all the moments she'd neglected in favour of idealized fantasies in her mind. She wished

she'd concentrated earnestly on those moments and given them the attention they'd deserved. They were now only memories, forever fixed and unalterable. She began to cry.

She thought of the times she had sat in the basement, resentfully scanning scrolls while others her age were out enjoying what little social entertainment Tess had to offer. Now, she wished she could feel that stable, safe feeling again. She cursed her younger self for wishing for adventure.

"Are you okay, my friend?" A'tok whispered softly.

Moki hadn't seen A'tok crouch down beside her and she tensed in surprise. Something in his eyes was gentle and calming. He really did feel like a friend.

"Honestly?" Moki asked.

"Always," A'tok smiled.

"I feel lost," Moki said.

"You found your way here," A'tok said.

"No, I didn't. I just kind of tumbled here. I don't feel like I have any control over anything that's happening. It just keeps thrashing further and further into chaos."

"Chaos is the natural order of things," A'tok said.

"All I feel is fear," Moki said.

"Did you not feel relief when we escaped the Ix'arki?" A'tok said. "Did you not feel happiness when you saw R'nox again. You did. I saw it."

Moki was silent for a moment and then looked up at A'tok. "It's so strange."

"Yes it is," A'tok laughed.

"No, I mean it's so strange that I feel that we know

each other," Moki explained.

"We do. I'm A'tok and you're Moki and we are friends," he smiled.

"Well, I'm glad I have a friend like you," Moki said. "Thank you for saving me."

"Thank you for saving *me*," he laughed and stood up. "You should get some sleep, Moki."

He walked back to his original place by the fire to lay down. He seemed to drift off to sleep very easily. Moki, however, still couldn't sleep.

The light of Mōt was beginning to peak out through the leaves above them and Moki realized she'd spent the whole Qi'Ar thinking. The others slowly began to stir and gradually the party gathered together. Ri'Somat directed them to the shortest path out of Ix'arki territory and into the land of the Xen'Oggos.

The group started a few short conversations but they were sparse and truncated by their fatigue and hunger. Although, A'tok seemed uniquely jovial and was humming various tunes as they walked.

A'tok excused himself from the group before they arrived at the Xen'Oggos settlement (Ri'Somat had called it Es'Ark) saying something about having to meet other friends.

"You're coming back though," Moki asked.

A'tok laughed. "Oh of course, my friend. I shall see you all soon. We have many more adventures to share together."

He waved congenially at them and then disappeared into the swamp, humming.

The Xen'Oggos settlement of Es'Ark was integrated with the swamp around it in a way that seamlessly entwined the natural with the artificial. Moki saw the city's buildings and structures had been constructed by augmenting the swamp around it into their design.

In contrast, the city of Tess was merely a collection of dusty streets and structures constructed from processed lumber hacked from the Feros Woods nearby. Tess was fed from square plots of land outside the city, harvested by farmers, and then sent for processing in neighbouring cities. These cities were quite often a fair distance away from Tess. The finished foods were then returned back to Tess.

Moki began to ask Ag'Ri about where their crops were and Ag'Ri seemed confused by the question.

"What is *crops*?" She tilted her head, curiously.

"How do you grow your food? This city is far bigger than where I grew up but you don't have any fields for growing food. How does Es'Ark feed itself ?" Moki asked.

Ag'Ri still seemed confused by her questions and Moki decided to drop it as everyone was visibly exhausted, dirty, and injured in some way or another.

They were greeted at the gates of Es'Ark by a group of Xen'Oggos who welcomed them with enthusiastically. They seemed, however, to be apprehensive about Oster. She didn't mind their hesitation.

Moki had tried to follow the exchange between Ag'Ri, Ri'Somat, and the Xen'Oggos welcoming them at the gate but quickly found her mind distracted by

tiredness.

"You must be exhausted," one of the Xen'Oggos said after noticing Moki yawn and she just nodded. "We have places for you to rest. Welcome to Es'Ark."

As they entered the city, Moki could see all the streets fanned out from a central point where a massive structure built into the raised roots of an enormous tree whose massive limbs stretched out wide over them.

"It's the Mother Tree," Ag'Ri said, following Moki's gaze. "She has kept the Xen'Oggos safe for countless Os and, in turn, we have been her protectors."

As they walked, Moki was greeted with expressions she interpreted as suspicion and distrust. They also seemed afraid of the Kot'Akk ur'ka, Kess, and the silent Osk'Ynarr who was conspicuously battling the blight. In any case, they didn't seem as welcoming as the Xen'Oggos who'd met them at the gates.

When they finally arrived at the base of the Mother Tree at the centre of Es'Ark, there was a delegation of elderly Xen'Oggos in ornate robes waiting for them. They bowed and welcomed them to follow them into the collection of roots and branches that were arranged and formed into rooms. There were some leaves that gave off a luminescence that lit the dark areas of the structure. There was something oddly comforting about the glow. Moki was finding that she was having trouble keeping her eyes open and the Xen'Oggos seemed to recognize it too.

"You must be tired from you journey," one of the Xen'Oggos, whom the rest seemed to be standing a few

paces behind, said. “Follow Es’Orin and they will direct you to your lodging.”

Moki dazedly followed and her mind was zipping in and out of the awareness of her surroundings, the crazed thoughts of her anxious mind, and then off into scenarios of some dark theoretical future horror that waited to jump out and assault them at any moment.

Ag’Ri rested a hand on Moki’s shoulder.

“Rest,” she said sweetly.

Moki nodded and followed Es’Orin the rest of the way to their lodging where she laid down and fell asleep the moment she closed her eyes.

When she slept she dreamed of a city she’d never been before. She saw a Pod’ka who looked like A’tok only much younger and who was combative instead of gentle. She saw two ghostly forms writhing around in the air above them in wispy conflict like angry pillars of smoke. She’d felt a rush of inertia and was pushed back, flying away from the younger Pod’ka, A’tok, and the two warring smoke beings.

Ag’Ri shook Moki awake and Moki’s whole body convulsed. Moki took a few moments to orient herself and then her mind caught up with her sore, tired body.

“It is time to eat,” Ag’Ri said. “After we eat we will go to the baths and we’ll get you new clothes.”

Moki hadn’t really thought about it before then but she hadn’t changed her clothes since Tess. That seemed a lifetime ago. She didn’t have to sniff her clothes to realize that they were grotesquely dirty. It seemed so unimportant before but now she was acutely aware of

the gritty, crusty way her clothes scraped against her skin as she adjusted herself.

"That would be wonderful," Moki said.

The baths were communal and open to the air and ossa-light. It seemed as though they were free to use. There were only two bathhouses in Tess but each was owned by shady Pod'ka and neither of them were free. The cheaper of the two bathhouses was a claustrophobic establishment enclosed in a seedy building connected to the brothel, a tavern, and an Inn. The trio of buildings were called *the Three Sisters*. The only other bathhouse in Tess was opulent and ostentatious used only by Tess nobility and traveling aristocracy. She'd never actually seen it as it was behind the inner courtyard walls that protected Tess' elite from the lower class. Cesynn had bragged many times to her about the beauty of the *good* baths. He'd frequently offered to *escort* her but she'd never taken him up on it.

She'd only been to the baths at the Three Sisters a few times but many of the Tulean bathers had objected to a blue witch using the baths thinking she would 'taint the water' for the other bathers.

The baths in Es'Ark were clear and pleasantly warm. The water was fed from a beautiful aqueduct that was formed naturally from bound branches lined with clay.

Everything seemed so peaceful here in Es'Ark but Moki's mind was rigidly bracing herself for the whole city to explode into chaos at any moment. Ag'Ri seemed to notice this and gently began cupping warm water

over Moki's shoulders. Moki shot her shoulder up toward her ears the instant the water touched her skin. When she turned to see Ag'Ri's kind eyes, Moki looked down into the water, embarrassed.

"It's okay, Moki," Ag'Ri said. "All warriors with gentle spirits have horror memories."

"Horror memories?"

"When I was younger, my father and brother fought in the war against Tul," Ag'Ri said. "I was too young to really remember but my uncle had died in the fighting; so did my older brother. When my father returned he was different than when he left. Most of the warriors were different. My mother said it was because of the horror memories. Sometimes people see things that are so awful or they experience such horror that it splits their lives into a before and an after. In that after, they relive the split again and again in their mind. Sometimes it consumes them.

"For my father, that split came when he saw his son, my brother, fall in battle in front of him. He was just beyond reach and unable to save him but close enough to feel the spray of his son's blood on his face when a Tulean soldier's blade removed his head."

Moki gasped.

"It consumed my father for many Os. He was cold and distant when he returned. He always looked like he was staring off into a far-off place; some terrifying vision that only he could see," Ag'Ri said. "Most times there was nothing I, my mother, or any of my siblings could say that would disturb him from his stupor.

Though sometimes he would flash into a manic, wild frenzy of chaotic emotions."

"Did he ever return to how he was before?"

"Never *exactly* as he was," Ag'Ri said. "But there was a time after the war finally ended, when Xen'Oggos emissaries sent word to all the tribes to send their warriors here to Es'Ark for a healing ceremony. When he returned, he seemed more at peace. Not how he was before the war, but . . . more himself."

Moki nodded but didn't say anything further. Ag'Ri continued to cup water over Moki's head and her shoulders. It was calming. She could see the clumps of soil dissolving in the water around her as they fell from her skin and hair into the water. Ag'Ri helped Moki wash until her skin was once again a pale blue and her bright hair had regained its luminous sheen. Moki stared at her reflection in the water and the face staring back at her seemed somehow older and somewhat unfamiliar.

"Moki," Ag'Ri rested a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Your robes are ready."

Once she changed, they were escorted away from the baths and back to the mother tree. There was a stairwell made from its own roots. Shaped by purposeful cultivation and manipulation of the mother tree itself. The stairwell led to a circular room. Tulean architects would have carved the room out of the trunk. Instead, it looked as though the branches had been manipulated and grown around the dimensions of the meeting room allowing for large open windows that looked out onto the lush foliage of Es'Ark below them. From this height,

they could see the extent of the whole swamp. She could see where the swamp ended and turned into the flat, green plains before reaching the mountains on the other edge of the valley.

Ri'Somat, Kess, and the others were already among the Xen'Oggos when Ag'Ri and Moki arrived. They'd told Moki that Oster was still being tended to by Xen'Oggos abjurers.

There were multiple older Xen'Oggos who wore colourful robes emblazoned with various sigils of the faiths of the old ones. Moki had read numerous tomes about the ancient religions. She recognized the sigils of Ka, Mōt, Arkus, and E'om but there were others she did not recognize.

"Mok'Ynarr," the Xen'Oggos wearing the sigil of Ka bowed to her as she neared. "You honour us with your presence. You have gone through much to reach us and we are grateful."

Moki nodded cautiously. She wasn't expecting a positive reception but the way they all looked at her was making her uncomfortable.

"The elders of the tribes have gathered here in Es'Ark to formulate a response to the encroaching threats to the Xen'Oggos and the Sen'Daris E'om."

*Sen'Daris E'om*, Moki's eyes widened.

"We are honoured to have a delegation from the Sen'Daris E'om with us," the Pod'ka nodded to a pair of ur'ka who wore cloaks bound at the collar with the emblem of the Sen'Daris E'om.

The delegation nodded back silently.

Moki listened intently to the meeting and it sounded like the Peace Enforcers had not always been a threat. Their expansionist incursions into Xen'Oggos territory had only begun when a Pod'ka they referred to as En'Ki had come to lead the Peace Enforcers. The destruction of Ag'Ri's settlement had been only one of many incursions displacing the Xen'Oggos from their homes in the swamp. Sending them to Es'Ark for refuge.

When Moki arrived, she had noticed the hastily built shelters outside the city walls had been packed and were sprawling back out into the swamp. Moki thought *that* was the blight colony but Ag'Ri had said there was a different site entirely. Ag'Ri had promised to take Moki to see Oster in the blight colony afterward.

During the meeting she learned the knowledge of Aq'Adez she'd read from the scrolls was inaccurate and no longer  how it currently was. Apparently, the previous political regime had been destroyed around the same the A'Yrr Pass. They never said how. Moki pieced together from their discussion that Aq'Adez was now governed by three powers: the Providers, the Council, and the Peace Enforcers. It sounded like these leaders were acting contrary to expectation, which Moki gathered had been once been benevolent but she couldn't be sure because she was inferring all this from context.

There was a natural break in the meeting and in the prolonged silence a Xen'Oggos in a blue cloak said: "We have to address the importance of the Mok'Ynarr in Aq'Adez."

Everyone turned to stare at Moki in a weird staggered syncopation and she shuddered.

The blue cloaked Xen'Oggos stepped to the centre of the room and pointed directly at Moki. She couldn't yet tell the intended tone behind his gestures.

"E'om has chosen now to challenge the dark ones," he said. "She is the omen, the harbinger of the final conflict."

There was wild, scattered chatter from all the delegates. Most of it seemed aggressively tense. One Xen'Oggos who'd been silent the whole time raised a hand and the delegates quieted.

After a long silence, three Xen'Oggos joined the blue cloaked Pod'ka and began conversing with one another in an older dialect of Sun'Ynarr that shared a lot of its grammar rules with a proto-Ark'fean language some of the earliest scrolls had been written in. They were talking about her like she couldn't understand them.

"Excuse me, honoured Pod'ka," Moki said in their same older dialect. They whipped their heads around to stare confusedly at her. "I don't appreciate being talked about as though I'm not here."

They looked uncomfortable and flustered and began apologizing in the common dialect of Sun'Ynarr that most in the meeting would understand.

"It was foretold that a Mok'Ynarr would come to us from the swamp," a Xen'Oggos said.

"And you're trying to decide if that's a good or bad omen?" Moki said and no one responded. "Well, I'm just an Y'nari. I didn't choose to be a Mok'Ynarr. I just kind

of found out that I was different as I grew older. I'm nothing special. I'm just me."

"We mean no disrespect," a Sun'Ynarr from the Sen'Daris E'om delegation stepped forward. "I believe we've gotten ourselves tangled in a somewhat combative introduction. That is not what we intend."

The delegate pulled back the hood of their cloak, revealing a face that was bandaged over one side; completely covering one eye.

"We are all on edge from the incursions of *the Three*," the delegate said. "We had been at peace for so long in Aq'Adez that we have forgotten the realities of war. This Mok'Ynarr deserves a greater understanding of this situation before we ask anything of her."

"Moki," She said. "My name is Moki Az'Urrka."

"MOKI" All the delegates said in unison.

It made her shiver.

Moki waved back, meekly.

"I request that we break our convergence until we can better inform Moki of the situation," the Sen'Daris E'om delegate said, staring at Moki in her singular gaze.

As the rest of the convergence dispersed, the one-eyed delegate stepped closer and introduced herself.

"I am Su'set of the Tulean Sen'Daris E'om," she shook Moki's hand. "I will not overwhelm you now. I understand you have a friend in the blight colony. We've sent our best abjurers to tend to her. You can go see them now and we will discuss what Aq'Adez and the Sen'Daris E'om have to ask of you."

Su'set nodded to Moki and then raised her hood

over her bandaged head disappearing into the crowd of other delegates as they cleared the chamber.

Ag'Ri and Ri'Somat said they had urgent affairs that they needed to attend to and would meet Moki back at the chamber once she'd seen Oster.

Oster was sleeping when they arrived but she looked much more herself. One of the abjurers saw Moki and stood gape-mouthed at her blue hair.

"You're a blue w-"

"A blue witch?" Moki smiled.

She was called much worse by the Tuleans and it amused her that the abjurer was a mortified shade of red.

He stammered out an apology but Moki waved them away. "Not to worry," she said. "Call me Moki."

"Moki," the abjurer said hesitantly. "We've largely healed the blight from your friend but she fought us when we tried to heal her scars and restore her voice. She kept disrupting the ritual so we couldn't maintain our wu'jik."

Moki looked at her sleeping friend.

"I don't think she'd want that," Moki said.

"But we can restore her voice and remove her scars," the abjurer said confusedly.

"If she doesn't want her voice restored or her scars removed I think you should stop trying to fight her on it," Moki said.

"We will not alter her any further," the abjurer made an incredulous face but nodded.

Moki stayed with her friend for a long while,

watching her sleep serenely. Oster was still sleeping when they left. When Moki returned to the convergence chamber, Ag'Ri and Ri'Somat were waiting for her along with Su'set.

"We know Aq'Adez is unfamiliar to you and this must be very confusing," Su'set began. "Do you have any questions?"

"Aq'Adez is not as I had read," Moki said. "Something has happened since the histories were written down."

"Correct," Su'set said, quietly sizing her up. "The Y'nari who were expelled from Tul by A'gor the Redeemer settled in the valley. In the last war, to stop Tulean expansion into Aq'Adez, they destroyed the A'Yrr Mountain Pass. The whole valley (from the swamp towards Ovin and to the mysts, towards Vol) was called Aq'Adez. No longer just another province of Ur'Bos or a vassal of Tul. Aq'Adez: a nation. All Y'nari who lived here returned to calling themselves Sun'Ynarr the way we had before the Tul'Ynarr and Qiat'Ynarr had imposed their superiority onto us and labelled us *Oz'bynarr*."

*Erased Beings* or *Those of Limited Use* depending on which emphasis one attributed to which syllable.

"Then, isolated from Ur'Bos and Tul, we were able to return to living in harmony with Aq'Adez as we had when we were Sun'Ynarr. We replenished what we took while also ensuring none went wanting," Su'set continued after a tense pause. "But then Sun'Ynarr settlements were attacked where Aq'Adez met the mysts. Survivors said it was Qiat'Ynarr who'd somehow crossed the mysts. It was said they were taking

Sun'Ynarr as slaves back to Ur'Bos. The Sen'Daris E'om went to investigate and many of our order were killed. The Qiat'Ynarr have indeed found a way to cross the mysts," Su'set said.

"Forgive me, but what are these mysts?" Moki asked. "Why is it so unbelievable that they've crossed them?"

"They are unnaturally thick patches of fog and have been known to drown those who merely walk among them," Su'set said. "They also freeze at Qi'Ar and boil in the light of Mōt. There is only a short window of time in which the mysts would not kill you. It's staggeringly expansive as well. It would've taken the Qiat'Ynarr nearly four ossa to cross the mysts on foot. Halfway through the first ossa the whole party would've died.

"The number of Qiat'Ynarr soldiers, as reported by Aq'Adezean survivors of the early raids, was very concerning even then. I could have understood maybe a dozen or so trained Qiat'Ynarr taking mountain paths to bypass the mysts but . . . the numbers that survivors claimed? It meant there had to be an army worth of Qiat'Ynarr in Aq'Adez. It's now been many Os since that realization.

"There had been a coup of sorts when knowledge of the impending Qiat'Ynarr invasion first took hold in Aq'Adez. There were a number of short dictatorships that sprung up in the name of expelling the Qiat'Ynarr but each one was devoured by the next. Then a new government took hold; one with a significant longevity in comparison. Since then, we've been under the rule

of *the Three*: the Providers, the Elder Council, and the Peace Enforcers.

"Aq'Adez actually experienced quite a wave of prosperity and safety for a time afterward. They used that prosperity to extend roads and start up new settlements for a growing population. They built their new capitol: Eb'Eros. They were even said to have pushed back the Qiat'Ynarr; at least the propaganda in the major centres makes it sound like the invasion is no longer a threat. Reports of raids have stopped and the Qiat'Ynarr have indeed seemed to disappear. No one can identify a cause.

"In truth, life in Aq'Adez has been very prosperous under the Three. Only in recent Os have they become corrupt. They have instituted numerous changes that run contrary to how the Three had presented their government in the past. These changes have made them more brutal and expansionist."

"Okay," Moki said. "But why tell me this, what can I do?" As the words slipped out of her mouth she realized they sounded aggressive and she apologized.

"Apologies are unnecessary," Su'set said. "We all understand your apprehensions."

"You do?" Moki said.

"This is not your fight," Su'set said. "And you've been through much."

"How would you you know that?" Moki felt herself becoming defensive and Su'set surely noticed but didn't bring attention to it.

"We know about you Moki. You are important to

the Sen'Daris E'om," Su'set said. "And Eo and Wensa were Y'nari I called friends."

Moki welled up instantly. Hearing their names sent tears racing down her cheeks, unrestrained. Su'set reached out and held Moki to her. Part of Moki was trying to flee but most of herself leaned into Su'set's embrace.

"Our order in Tul had not anticipated *the Voldari* appearing in Tess," Su'set said.

*The Dark Judges.*

"We could not organize fast enough to intervene and, by the time we arrived in Tess, Eo and Wensa were both dead and you were nowhere to be found. Would you like us to continue this discussion another time?" Su'set asked.

"No," Moki shook her head and dried her eyes with one of her new sleeves. "Please continue."

"There are elements of the Peace Enforcers who disagree with the changes that have been made and what they're being ordered to do. There's a growing insurgency against the powers in Eb'Eros. We ask that you travel from Es'Ark to the villages between here and onto Eb'Eros, connecting with other Sen'Daris E'om delegates along the way," Su'set explained. "Before you agree, we will give you a much more nuanced explanation of what's expected of you. I didn't want to overwhelm you all at once."

# Chapter 24

After meeting with Su'set, Ag'Ri and Ri'Somat went back to see Oster. R'nox had stayed with Oster. At first Moki was surprised but then she was caught by the realization that she hadn't noticed that whole time how R'nox hadn't been there with her.

While they were waiting for Oster to wake up, Moki and the others took turns sitting beside her. R'nox never seemed to want to leave. Moki had taken a walk around Es'Ark and only now was her pulse beginning to beat at a gentle, calm rhythm. She was looking at the architecture of the city and trying to focus on their dimensions but her mind kept jerking itself back into the same traumatic loop. She tried to shake the thoughts from her head but noticed that a Xen'Oggos had seen her do it and added a nervous cough; lowering

her eyes as she passed.

Moki returned to Oster after that and then decided to stay put. Oster awoke midway through the next ossa. The abjurers provided food and water for them and Oster ravenously devoured everything they put in front of her. She didn't gesture until most of the way through her second meal.

<<I'm still here>> Oster gestured.

<<We're glad you are, Oster>> Moki gestured before touching her hand. Oster flinched momentarily and then let her hand stay there beneath Moki's.

"I don't know what you gestured but we're happy you're feeling better," Kess said. "They said you wouldn'-"

Moki turned to Kess and subtly shook her head: no.

"They said you wouldn't be alive if we hadn't gotten you here when we did," Moki said turning back to Oster.

<<you owe *me* now>> Moki gestured playfully. Oster smiled weakly.

Su'set came to talk with Moki again without expanding her understanding of the Sen'Daris E'om by much. They still weren't being clear about why they wanted Moki to go to Eb'Eros. She was, however, very grateful for the way they were taking care of them all. Her mind was still alight with fear but intellectually she understood the relative safety of Es'Ark and how long it had consistently been that she'd been safe. Her mind, though, kept screaming at her about how unsafe she was. Her whole body wanted to run but knew she was in Aq'Adez and had no idea where she would run to

even if she did. She remembered seeing some old maps but she wasn't sure where on that map they currently were.

Moki finally agreed to travel to Eb'Eros after Su'set talked with her again. Only after Oster recovered. The abjurers had said it would be no more than *a senix*; two at the most.

The longer they stayed in Es'Ark the more Moki was beginning to understand about the blight. Wu'jik and er'gosi shards use were both connected in every case of the blight. She asked the abjurers what it was they were doing to heal blighted Y'nari and they acted very offended and refused to talk to her.

Oster was walking around after the third ossa and by end of the first senix Oster was getting restless as well. They explained to Su'set and the rest of the council that they would leave shortly after. In the two ossa it took to get the expedition together, the Xen'Oggos prepared a celebration to send them on their journey. There were musicians and dancers and when Mōt set beyond the mountains, the ritual began. She noticed people were passing around this deep, ornately carved bowl and drinking from it. Moki marvelled at Oster's energy as she'd just spent so long staring at her shallow breathing by her bedside. Oster drank deeply. Moki imbibed more cautiously but enjoyed the taste and drank a little more before passing the bowl along.

<<what was that?>> Moki gestured.

Oster just shrugged and then started to dance with one of the Xen'Oggos in an uncharacteristically

boisterous manner.

"What was that?" Moki turned to Ag'Ri.

"We are opening our memories to each other," Ag'Ri said; jovial, relaxed, and smiling.

Moki tensed and began darting her eyes around the room anxiously, avoiding everyone's gaze.

"It is part of the healing and purification ceremony before we begin our journey," Ag'Ri continued.

She began to wonder if she really could hear the voices that were starting to creep into her mind or if she was just imagining she heard them because she was expecting to hear voices shortly. Some of the other voices were anxious as well and she couldn't tell where they were coming from as everyones faces seemed so contented and happy. She concluded that the voices must all be hers and that she was somehow poisoning the ritual for others. One of the Xen'Oggos hugged her and then looked into her eyes. It was then that her awareness jumped outward and expanded far beyond her body. She could feel everything within the new awareness' bubble. She was acutely aware of the others' expanded awarenesses that were overlapping with hers. In the places they overlapped, she pulled happy memories and euphoric feelings. As well, she snagged against the sharp, turbulent chaos of dark thoughts. The more she saw, the more she began to realize that the two existed in a constant push and pull for everyone; neither ceding too much land before charging in to overtake the other again. This idea calmed her. Seeing the trauma and euphoria of the others helped her not to feel alone.

The gate of Es'Ark exploded and Moki wasn't even fully aware of what was going on before she was being funnelled toward a side exit to Es'Ark. She was still buzzing from the ritual drink and phasing in and out of the awareness of those around her. She could see that a contingent of Peace Enforcers were attacking Es'Ark. They'd already begun streaming in the front gate and were beginning to set the structures on fire as they spread through the city. Bright panic was taking over the thoughts in the overlapping bubbles of awareness and Moki was feeling her horror memories return. The Xen'Oggos were trying to defend the city while Su'set and others of the Sen'Daris E'om were leading Moki and her friends away. Moki looked around for R'nox. Her hysteria was reaching an intensity that was becoming overwhelming.

R'nox squealed and leapt onto her shoulder and dug securely into her fabric as she ran. Moki was breathing in such ragged gasps that she was becoming light headed. She could still feel the thoughts of the frantic Xen'Oggos who were fighting and falling against the onslaught of the Peace Enforcers. She saw the awarenesses of those who were fleeing as well. She saw them entering chambers underneath Es'Ark that looked like they shared designs with At'an, the Ix'arki complex, and Sug'Ogg's ancient city underneath the mountains. She saw a few who raced towards teleporters until then their awareness blinked out and she could no longer feel them within the collective of awareness.

And then she felt a burst of what she thought might

be relief as something the thoughts were referring to as *An'Vol* absolutely obliterated the Peace Enforcers. *An'Vol* was the last thought she had before everything went black.

# Chapter 25

Moki awoke at a campfire but they were no longer in the swamp.

<<Do you owe me now? Or are we even?>> Oster smiled.

"What happened?" Moki's head was throbbing angrily.

<<we had to leave quickly>> Oster gestured.

As Moki remembered, her whole body jerked like she'd been stabbed. She looked around dazedly and took inventory of her surrounding.

Oster and R'nox were within arms reach and she could see Kess was still sleeping. Ag'Ri and Ri'Somat were across the fire from two others she didn't recognize.

Oster seemed to see Moki's thoughts and gestured:

<<bodyguards>>

They closed up their camp when it got light out. The ones Oster said were bodyguards directed them to their first stop on their trek to Eb'Eros. A smaller village they'd called In'dra. They were jumped by bandits halfway to the village. The leader of the bandits had gone into some cocky monologue about selling them to something called *Kerosi's Army*. Moki's bodyguards didn't let him finish. They cut the bandits down with a few swings of their swords while their leader was distractedly monologuing. The cocky linguist fumbled with his weapon before he too was run through by Moki's bodyguards.

When they finally arrived in In'dra, they found Biorix standing next to a slightly taller Pod'ka with piercing eyes drinking in the tavern connected to the Inn.

Her whole life, everyone she met would have an initial moment of '*Oh E'om! She's a Mok'Ynarr*'. That wasn't so with Biorix's companion. The Sun'Ynarr with piercing blue eyes looked at her as though he were expecting to meet a Mok'Ynarr.

"Moki! Oster!" Biorix gripped Moki in a hug.

Oster brought her hands up between them before they could hug her and gestured: <<no>>

Biorix didn't need a translation and nodded a greeting to her instead.

"You're alive!" Moki gasped. "I'm so sorry we left you. How did you escape?"

"I didn't need to," Biorix said. "It was all a

misunderstanding."

"It was?"

"It was the Dagger of Absolom that charged the device. After you'd disappeared the dagger stopped glowing and the portal closed," Biorix took the dagger out to show Moki. "It hasn't begun to glow again since. After Rel was rejuvenated, Sug'ogg put us on our path to connect with you as you came back across Aq'Adez."

"Wait wait, Sug'ogg?" Kess stammered. "Like the *god* Sug'ogg? You spoke with a god..."

<<they *were* doing some pretty weird stuff>> Oster gestured to no one.

"How did Sug'ogg know we were coming back this way?" Moki asked.

"Hey! Get that *feral Sun'Ynarr* outta here!" One of the workers at the Inn seemed to have a problem with Ag'Ri and started making a fuss. He was warbling about how, because of feral Sun'Ynarr, there was an er'gosi shortage and it was making everything more expensive.

<<that's a weird way to frame what happened>> Oster gestured.

"Thank E'om that Peace Enforcers have responded to the razing of the mining settlement by attacking feral Sun'Ynarr nests," the Pod'ka kept stepping aggressively closer.

Biorix stepped in between Ag'Ri and the angry Pod'ka, staring him down. The Pod'ka seemed to recognize Biorix immediately and his tone changed. He was instantly apologetic and excused himself to attend

to something in the kitchen.

Biorix directed them to follow them to speak with the Innkeeper who Biorix also seemed to know. The way they were talking with the tavern owner indicated the two were friendly.

Moki just stared at Biorix. Her mind was confusedly sorting memories and it was having a hard time placing Biorix as either safe or in danger; both felt acutely real to her.

"Does your mother know you're back?"

"Your mother?" Moki said but was excluded by both Biorix and the Innkeeper from the conversation save for the frequent confused glances the Innkeeper shot at Moki's blue hair. In contrast, the taller Pod'ka with piercing eyes still hadn't taken his eyes off Moki since they entered the Inn. His eyes, however, were friendly and welcoming; like he knew her.

"She's pretty upset?" Biorix grimaced.

"Upset enough to promise any establishment in the basin significant compensation for immediately turning you in to the local Peace Enforcers," the Innkeeper smirked.

"*That* upset, huh?"

"You ditched the coronation and you stole the Dagger of Absolom from the temple," the Innkeeper laughed. "No one *ever* steals from the temple. It wasn't even guarded."

"That made it particularly easy to steal," Biorix laughed. "I still have it. It's not like I wasn't going to bring it back. I just needed it to save Rel."

"Rel? That goofy ancient war hero uncle of yours?"

"Greetings," Rel smiled. "*Goofy ancient war hero*. I don't believe I got your name."

"Wait, *you're* Rel?" Moki asked.

Rel nodded. "And you're the Mok'Ynarr."

"I am the Mok'Ynarr," she said.

"It is very nice to meet you," Rel shook her hand. "And who is this vision?"

Rel gently gestured to Kess and waited for her to agree to rest her hand in his. She blushed and set her hand in his. He kissed it gently.

"You wear an ar'bossi?" Rel said to Kess, noticing her ring. "A Priestess of Mōt; *to be cherished and revered*."

Rel began to ask Kess about the Priestesses of Mōt and Oster gestured: <<I do not wish to hear>>

"Well, we do," Moki said. "I remember reading that Mōt was somehow connected to *the Light-bringers*. I was always intrigued when Eo would mention them but I still am not quite sure what they were. Were they supposed to be divine?"

"Supposed to be," Kess said. "In scriptures it said that they were travellers from beyond E'thur who brought an intelligence to Te'a. Before their arrival, all the beings of Te'a were simple beasts that did not self-reflect, did not wonder, did not love. They acted as beasts act for the purposes of beasts. The Light-bringers brought culture, philosophy, music, and community to the Y'nari. That's why they were known as the Light-bringers. They transformed the beastly races of Y'nari

from mindless animals into divine vessels of the spark. There were 9 divine Light-bringers who ruled a unified Te'a after gifting awareness to the Y'nari."

<<superstitious nonsense>> Oster rolled her eyes.

Moki turned to Oster: <<We *literally* talked to a god>>

Oster waved her hand back and forth noncommittally.

"What happened to the Light-bringers?" Moki asked Kess.

"The were lost in an ancient cataclysm in which Te'a belched up an unbelievable amount of energy that shot up into the E'thur. It spread out across the skin of Te'a. The cataclysm destroyed the old world. Then, the A'ua'ki and the Ark'fey appeared."

"That's all still pretty vague," Moki said.

"Well, there's not much to go on," Kess said. "There is very little evidence of anything before the Ark'fey and A'ua'ki except for the Og'lisa scriptures. I was excavating a site in upper Aq'Adez, one of the fallen cities, where I found what I believed to be evidence that the Light-bringers *became* the A'ua'ki and the Ark'fey after the destruction of the old world. The elders at my chapter of the Priestesses of Mōt didn't particularly appreciate my take on history. When I brought it up with the regional elders they told me to stop digging or face excommunication and imprisonment."

"Oh," Moki said.

"Yah, It was incredibly discouraging to realize that an order to which you've devoted all of your adult life betrayed the very ideal it had sold itself on," Kess

breathed. "'Sorry ur'ka, your search for truth and meaning ends at the edge of dogma'. I had devoured all the scripture I'd had access to as a Priestess; always trying to learn more. I read all that is written about our origins in the Og'lisa to the point I could recite it.

"With my research I'd uncovered from all the various sites I'd visited around Te'a, I had learned that the current canon of the Og'lisa was not always so. I learned things that there were many omitted scrolls. These scrolls contradicted what we'd all been taught. The evidence was so blatant that I thought for sure the order for whom I'd devoted my life would welcome this new truth in whatever form truth took . . ." Kess trailed off. "I was mistaken."

"You are a very strong ur'ka with unwavering integrity," Rel said, locking eyes with Kess who blushed again and looked away, coyly.

"Tell me more about meeting the god, Sug'ogg?" Kess asked, touching Rel's hand.

# Chapter 26

There were Y'nari at the Inn who said they were on their way to Eb'Eros. Their village had been destroyed by Kerosi's Army and had heard the Providers would take care of them when they arrived in Eb'Eros. Biorix said they were heading that way themselves and offered to escort them.

Moki didn't know who she was supposed to connect with from the Sen'Daris E'om at each of the settlements they'd passed through. Each time they left without connecting with anyone. When Moki and the others finally arrived in Eb'Eros their party was split from the Aq'Adezean refugees at the outer checkpoint before entering the city. Knowing Biorix seemed to fast track their audience with the Providers. As Moki listened, she heard Eb'Eros citizens and the other officials refer

to the refugees as “undesirables”.

Their disdain for the refugees (whom she had grown quite fond of during their journey to Eb’Eros) angered Moki but she kept silent and just listened.

The citizens were always shocked momentarily when they’d first see her; a Mok’Ynarr. It was instantly followed by overt repulsion to the presence of the feral Sun’Ynarr, Ag’Ri. Then, when they saw the two knew Biorix, they immediately began treating them with saccharine deference.

The way the Y’nari from Eb’Eros talked about the “undesirables” made it sound like they were confident that their travelling companions were not going to be provided for. That confused Moki because it sounded to her that the “undesirables” were under the impression that Eb’Eros took care of *all* Y’nari who travelled there. She couldn’t forget because Yon’Ik wouldn’t let her the whole length of their journey. The idea that Yon’Ik and his fellow refugees would not be provided for hurt her soul. The Sun’Ynarr never really expanded on *why* Yon’Ik and the others were “undesirables” other than they were. Moki made sure to keep Yon’Ik in her mind and planned to check in on him once she got settled in Eb’Eros. Whatever that looked like.

Moki and the others met with the Providers to get their lodging assignments. The purpose of the Providers seemed to be to ensure that all the material needs of Eb’Eros citizens and visitors to the city were taken care of. Moki had stated they’d only need temporary lodging and the group was sent to the outer city.

Kess had lied about her name when asked. She said that she would be staying at the Temple of Mōt and that, as a travelling Priestess of Mōt, she was on a pilgrimage to one of the temples in the A'Yrr Mountains.

"Can Oster and I live together?" Moki had asked.

The officiant looked at her like she's was being absurd.

<<I'm your Oz'bari>> Oster gestured discreetly.

"She's my Oz'bari," Moki said.

<<you acquired me because you like my horns>>

"I acquired her," Moki began but paused when she processed the words and then tried not to make a face when she finally said: "I like her horns."

"You must be one wealthy ur'ka to have an Osk'Ynarr Oz'bari," the officiant said. "We can arrange for another seat to be provided for you."

Moki wasn't sure what that meant but she nodded.

"I really like Osk'Ynarr horns too," the officiant said quietly, leaning in. "They're so exotic."

Moki was given a rectangular paper with red tassels hanging from the base. In red ink running from bottom to top were symbols that read: outer city quadrant. Moki turned the paper over and saw some other writing she had no context for but assumed it was about her lodging.

"Give this to the Provisions Coordinator," an officiant said.

"What brings someone so rich to Eb'Eros? If you don't mind my asking?" Another officiant inquired.

"My friends have heard of the superior quality of

Eb'Eros black leaf!" Kess responded for Moki.

Moki nodded.

"We do have *the* best black leaf in all of Aq'Adez," the officiant said. "We have our own black leaf fields just on the other side of the river. The fourth quadrant is the trade district; close to the visitor units," a Provider said. "We want special guests to Eb'Eros like you to have every convenience."

There was something ominous or disingenuous in his smile; Moki couldn't decide which. Before they went to their lodgings, Moki requested an audience with the Council but was told that they would have to wait a few ossa as there were many ahead of her.

"I'd heard that there was a Mok'Ynarr and her Osk'Ynarr Oz'bari in the outer city and I figured that could only be you," Biorix said, resting on the gate leading to Moki's lodgings she shared with Oster.

"Not many other Mok'Ynarr in Aq'Adez I hear," Moki nodded wryly. "Glad to be home?"

"Honestly? I think I'm in a lot of trouble," Biorix said.

"Trouble?" Moki laughed. "You seem to be doing pretty okay."

"Better than most; I'm very aware of that. Don't think I'm not," Biorix smiled. "Most Y'nari's mothers aren't on the Elder Council."

"Yah, that's probably a pretty elite demographic," Moki laughed. "This place is weird."

"Isn't it!?" Biorix agreed. "This place is bizarre."

"Is everyone smoking black leaf?" Moki asked.

“Every Y’nari I passed on the way to my unit seemed to be smoking and staring into an orb that was absorbing their energy.”

“Absorbing?” Biorix laughed. “What are you talking about?”

“When Y’nari smoke the black leaf, this cloud begins to seep out of their skin and then gets sucked into the orb thingy they’re holdi-“

“Nope,” Biorix cut Moki off. “What are you talking about?”

“The cloud that comes ou-“

“No, there’s no way that’s real,” Biorix chuckled.

“It is,” Moki insisted. “When people smoke black leaf this cloud of energy comes out and-“ Moki realized she could prove that’s what she was seeing and playfully dragged Biorix out of her lodgings. A few units down, there was an Y’nari who was smoking black leaf from a long, decorative pipe and staring into an er’gosi sphere on a thin, metal pedestal.

“He’s just on the orb,” Biorix said. “What are you talking about Moki?”

“You don’t see the cloud around him and that eerie green glow coming from that orb?” Moki asked.

Biorix suddenly stopped smiling. “Oh, you’re serious!”

“Of course,” Moki said.

“No,” Biorix said. “There is definitely nothing there. You’re freaking me out.”

“You’re freaking *me* out!” Moki said. “You really don’t see it?”

They both decided not to talk about it anymore and went back to Moki's unit.

Ag'Ri was in a unit a far distance away from Moki but still in the outer city. Kess had lied about not needing a domicile and so had avoided being assigned a unit of her own. She opted instead to stay in Ag'Ri's unit. None of their neighbours noticed.

Moki found it amusing that Eb'Eros sounded so much like the evil god, Er'Ebos: *the unending darkness*. In Sun'Ynarr, Eb meant *three*; Os was *one cycle of all the seasons*. Basically the name translated to *the Eternal City of the Three*.

In Eb'Eros, there was indeed an er'gosi shortage but the propaganda floating around the city told how the Peace Enforcers had retaken the mines and the shortage would only be "temporary".

"Thank Mōt, we'll never have a shortage of black leaf," a Sun'Ynarr merchant told Moki when she'd visited the market.

"Why not?" Moki asked.

At first the merchant had made a face as though she'd asked an absolutely absurd question but then seemed to realize that Moki (with her blue-hair and curved horns) was likely not from around Eb'Eros. The merchant pointed at the rolling red fields on the opposite bank of the river that cut them away from the residential areas of the outer city.

"Eb'Eros maintains it own supply of black leaf and has since the beginning," the merchant said. "Smarmy dealers are trying to sell er'gosi for four times what the

er'gosi are worth, but I'm not greedy. I know that the shortage is temporary and I wouldn't want to cheat the customer. I care about the customer." The Sun'Ynarr said a word that Moki knew must be some kind of currency but she had no context for how much (or how little) that denomination was worth.

"That's still three times as much as one would usually pay," another had said.

The merchant smiled and said: "Oh yes, but not *four*."

Moki started to leave.

"What about double," the merchant asked as Moki left.

It was said, the er'gosi orb worked as a kind of communication device. One could talk with people over long distances when mental concentration mixed with the black leaf. The mechanics of which were much like the communal memory sharing of the Xen'Oggos but artificially strengthened by the er'gosi orb and the black leaf.

Moki explained to them how she didn't like that black leaf makes a black cloud ooze out of you.

Oster confusedly gestured: <<what are you talking about? that's terrifying. That doesn't happen>>

"Not you guys too. What do you mean that doesn't happen?" Moki said. "That's what's happening right now?"

"What's happening now?" Kess asked.

Moki explained matter-of-factly exactly what she was seeing happening and everyone was severely

unnerved. They did not see the clouds that Moki said would ooze out from the Y'nari that smoked the black leaf. They did not see the cloud being absorbed by the orb of er'gosi. To them, it just looked like an orb of ordinary er'gosi.

In Eb'Eros, the citizens of the outer city each had their own units and plot enough to grow any extra food they needed. Moki learned that most of the citizens ate in the commercial district or had Providers bring them food. The units near Moki had chosen to grow decorative flowers or their own black leaf instead of food.

Eb'Eros citizens seemed to *really* really like their black leaf.

"I feel more comfortable talking on the orb," an Y'nari had said to Moki when she eventually tried to talk with others in neighbouring units.

Many Y'nari enthusiastically encouraged Moki to smoke the black leaf and try the orb. She kept telling them that she'd like to know a little bit more about it first. They always acted confused; incredulous as to why she'd refuse. They'd always stammer out a clumsy response about how everyone in Eb'Eros is "on the orb". They'd say that black leaf "heightens your connection to the orb".

"We have our own black leaf production and processing regime that ensures you have the finest and most pure black leaf in all of Aq'Adez," the Y'nari had said.

"So I've heard," Moki said, dryly. "More than once."

Moki frequently went to check on the status of her audience with the Council. Each time she was told she had to meet with the *minor Council* beforehand. There was a backlog delaying an audience with *them* as well.

# Chapter 27

A stone being like the one she'd first encountered in the A'Yrr Mountain Pass walked up beside her casually and no one else seemed like it was as terrifying as it was to Moki. She fought the urge to scream and flee. No one else appeared disturbed at all. Her mind was still on fire with anxiety but her body stood rigidly stoic as the stone being approached.

MOKI AZ'URKA

The stone being stood before her. The image of an Y'nari popped into existence, projected in the air in front of the stone being's torso. It bellowed her name in the same voice that it had aggressively barked at her in the Mountains in an ancient tongue.

PLEASE COME WITH THE CONSTRUCT. IT WILL DIRECT YOU TO YOUR AUDIENCE WITH THE COUNCIL.

The Construct turned and began walking away. Moki was still rigid and tensely staring at the oddly docile version of the stone being who'd disintegrated Y'nari in the Mountains with orbs of energy.

She followed the Construct through a pair of gates and over a bridge. Something felt wrong but Moki was trying to suppress that feeling intellectually. She watched the back of the Construct as it moved on its long appendages. She looked at the Y'nari face projected in the torso of the Construct and only then noticed that it didn't have any horns.

When she arrived to finally get an audience she learned she'd bypassed the minor Council and would be seen by the Council itself. She found Biorix and the others waiting for her outside the massive chamber doors. Moki's two bodyguards were conspicuously absent. Biorix looked agitated in a way she found ominous.

The Council Chamber doors opened and Vo'dis Skek was waiting for them. Skek's light leeching armour warped the view of the elegant Y'nari sitting on a throne behind them. She stood from her throne and glowered down at Biorix who kept shooting angry glances at her. Moki assumed she was Biorix's mother. As the group was being arrested and separated, Moki's mind was off somewhere else thinking, sputtering, and spinning in a dark loop. She couldn't pinpoint exactly when on her journey things had begun to feel unreal or dream-like but the feeling was reaching a terrifying crescendo. The last while, she'd felt dragged along

behind events that were happening outside of herself. Her experience of time kept oscillating back and forth between hyper-awareness and dissociation. She realized she couldn't remember how many senix it had been since she'd arrived in Eb'Eros. She was unsure of how long she'd lived in that unit she shared with Oster next to the dazed, decadent Sun'Ynarr that were constantly trying to coax her into *getting on the orb*. Backward from there, she had no idea how long it had taken them to travel Eb'Eros from Es'Ark with Yon'Ik and the other refugees through the various settlements across southern Aq'Adez. She realized she'd forgotten to check on Yon'Ik and a feeling of shame folded itself into Moki's silent hysteria.

She looked at her hands as they were being bound together by Peace Enforcers and noticed how aged and unfamiliar they seemed. She had looked at her hands so many times in the washing pails at the Inn as she'd scrubbed plates and utensils. Back then, her hands had a youthful sheen that had since calloused over.

She heard Biorix shouting vociferously with the official she assumed was their mother before they were escorted from the room alongside Kess. Moki absently noted that R'nox was safely in Kess' arms. Albeit begrudgingly. R'nox squirmed belligerently in her grasp as they were led out of the room through a side entrance by Constructs.

Vo'dis Skek was saying something about sending Moki back to Tul and how they were going to send Ag'Ri and Oster to the mountains to become Oz'bari.

Moki followed the tug on her restraints but didn't look up. She was still thrashing around in her mind; disconnected and frightened. She was only partially aware of the hazy, condemning eyes that glowered at her as she was led through Eb'Eros by a pair of Constructs and several Sen'Daris Er'Ebos soldiers. They loaded her into a carriage pulled by two nun'bak and left the city for the A'Yrr Mountains.

Moki was thinking scattered thoughts while A'tok was saving her through a mix of cunning trickery and having been underestimated by the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos guards because of his age. She thought about the ritual back in Es'Ark.

She swore that she'd recognized a presence among all of the other awarenesses she'd phased through, and in and out of, during the ritual. She swore she'd felt that presence when thinking dark thoughts in the Pass after she'd lost Eo and Wensa. She'd felt it once again when she repelled the Guris'ak. And now, as she was being saved by A'tok, she could feel it again.

After the guards were no longer a problem, A'tok looked silently at her with an understanding kindness.

Through her blurred, disconnected vision, Moki thought she saw the Mok'Ynarr from the A'Yrr Mountains running up behind A'tok. He slowed as he neared and seemed surprised that he wouldn't have to save Moki; that she was already safe. The Mok'Ynarr from the mountains was talking to A'tok and revealed his name was R'Ix. He said that he'd been instructed him to protect Moki and to bring her to Ni'Yon.

"Do you know how we get there?" A'tok asked him.

"I don't."

"I do!" A'tok said jovially. "But it's very far. Very far."

"We can't leave Oster!"

"Oh no. Of course not. Can't leave our dear friends Oster and Kess" A'tok agreed enthusiastically.

"Is Moki okay?" R'Ix asked A'tok as though Moki wasn't right there, but then she realized that she *wasn't* right there.

Moki became acutely aware that her body was just sitting there in the nun'bak carriage, staring forward at the empty seat across from her.

"What's wrong with her?" R'Ix asked.

"There's nothing wrong with her," A'tok looked at her and smiled. "This is just what happens when someone with a kind soul has had enough of horror and cruelty."

"We can't stay here," R'Ix said.

"No we can't," A'tok agreed. "Then you should take her to your friends at the Sen'Daris E'om."

Even while mostly disconnected, Moki could sense the surprise in R'Ix at the mention of his clandestine order.

Absently, Moki saw A'tok begin a healing wu'jik ritual and she felt that familiar blue energy again.

There was a feeling of inertia from inside her mind and then things began to focus; in her vision *and* in her mind.

"I have some things to attend to. I've more friends to

collect," A'tok walked into the swamp and disappeared. "Protect our dear Moki, my friend."

# Chapter 28

She could tell she was becoming more aware because she was able to determine the passage of senix with increasing clarity. She didn't ask many questions nor did she talk very much unless she was personally addressed. She didn't like looking anyone directly in the eye but that too was getting easier. R'Ix had taken Moki to a secret Sen'Daris E'om training facility in the swamp. It seemed safe and she ate regularly. She hadn't asked any more information.

It was around the time that Moki was more present than she wasn't that she began asking to go save Oster and Ag'Ri. She was told they first had to find a way into the Oz'bari Mines to save the other captives before any attempt could be made.

Moki realized very quickly that because she and

R'Ix were Mok'Ynarr they couldn't go to any of the surrounding settlements as their blue hair would be far too easy to spot. The Peace Enforcers were actively looking for Mok'Ynarr after her escape.

The Sen'Daris E'om had began to teach her about transformation wu'jik. Moki gradually progressed from animal transformations to being able to disguise herself as a Sun'Ynarr. She was getting pretty proud of how long she was able to hold the transformations but the exertion was exhausting. When she was a Sun'Ynarr, Moki assumed the name Xe'Velia.

*Ghost of the Forest.*

It was the name Moki had wished she'd been given as a young ur'ka in Tul. Moki had always considered her given name was a little too weighty. There was a long time that she resented it. For awhile, she'd started going by Xe'Velia when asked at the Inn by travellers. Eo seemed to understand but always called her Moki. Wensa, however, would sometimes call her by her chosen name.

Thoughts of Wensa and Eo sucker-punched Moki's concentration during one of her treks into an Aq'Adezean village and the image of Xe'Velia stuttered and distorted. Moki was discovered by the tavern keep with half of her head phased back into the blue of Moki while the other remained the pinkish orange of Xe'Velia. A detachment of Peace Enforcers in a camp outside the village moved in to capture her.

The An'Vol arrived and made quick work of the Peace Enforcers. The An'Vol took Moki and R'Ix back

with them to their hideout where they revealed that the An'Vol was an older blind Qiat'Ynarr ur'ka.

Moki let R'Ix do all of the talking (as she usually did) but the Qiat'Ynarr was the one who was doing most of the talking anyway. She'd said that she had been following Moki's exploits throughout Aq'Adez. Moki kept almost looking at the An'Vol but felt the tense pulling of her eyes to prefer the floor. The An'Vol explained that she was also with the Sen'Daris E'om but not the ones Moki and R'Ix were. *They* would have no knowledge of her.

The An'Vol was part of a separate, secret unit who all wore the same kind of armour. No one was really in charge and there was no list of active members.

"Anyone who is against the fascist rule of *the Three* are An'Vol," she said.

The blind ur'ka knew of numerous Y'nari around Aq'Adez who'd donned the armour of the An'Vol. There were many more whom she didn't. There were also others who spread the myths about the An'Vol to any and all who would listen. Some An'Vol were trained to use wu'jik.

"Er'gosun had once been the only source of wu'jik in Te'a," the An'Vol said. "It's power was said to have travelled here with the Light-bringers; contained within a sacred object. Only a select few were allowed to harness the sacred object allowing them to wield wu'jik. There was one who felt that the power was being abused and exploited. They wished to free Er'gosun from its containment. However, when Tarkondrius destroyed

the sacred object in order to free Er'gosun, it shattered the god into fourteen lesser gods. All of Te'a is now free to use wu'jik as long as they can learn to harness it. But now the lesser gods are vying for control of Te'a. A dark power is growing and is poised to consume us all. The Sen'Daris Er'Ebos seeks to coerce the other gods to joining the gathering darkness."

Neither R'Ix or Moki reacted as though that was new information and it seemed to confuse and amuse the An'Vol.

# Chapter 29

R'Ix and the An'Vol talked about how to get into the Oz'bari mines. The blind ur'ka told them that the facility opened only once every senix to receive new Oz'bari and exchange other materials. The An'Vol had heard a rumour that a high ranking member of the Peace Enforcers was going to be arriving to speak with the leader of the slavers. An envoy from the Qiat'Ynarr and Vo'dis Skek were also expected to be in attendance.

R'Ix and the An'Vol had sent word of their plan to a contact the An'Vol had with the Sen'Daris E'om. The organized attack crippled the meagre defence the slavers put up and they were able to liberate the Oz'bari. They freed Oster who immediately noticed the change in Moki. Moki couldn't bring herself to meet Oster's

eyes.

During the escape, Oster had seen an opportunity to kill Connat but for some reason didn't. Moki was only *sort of* paying attention, intentionally blocking out most of the chaos.

When Ag'Ri found her father and some of the other Xen'Oggos, Moki saw their exuberant and tearful reunion. Moki was starting to let her guard down and feel the emotions of her surroundings. She was about to gesture to Oster when reinforcements of the Peace Enforcers appeared over the lip of the hill. Vo'dis Skek was with them.

Very quickly they began losing the momentum of the battle.

Vo'dis Skek was aggressively seeking them out and incapacitated R'Ix before coming for Moki.

Unified battle-cries of the Xen'Oggos and Ix'arki filled the valley before the entrance to the mines. Animals from the swamp began pouring out of the foliage, rushing over the lip of the embankment, and charging down towards the slavers, Peace Enforcers, and Sen'Daris Er'Ebos forces. The giant, hornless Y'nari, Sug'ogg, and the other Sug'ogg Sun'Ynarr appeared screaming from the tree line.

Moki was pretty sure that Vo'dis Skek had been killed. She didn't know if that was truth or a fantastical, hopeful vision. In her mind, she remembered seeing him die though she knew she could no longer truly trust what she remembered. If Vo'dis Skek weren't dead, the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos had been forced to retreat in any

case.

Moki and the others went back to the secret A'ua'ki complex the Sen'Daris E'om in Aq'Adez were currently using as a command centre. R'Ix kept trying to get Moki back to *normal*. Moki could tell in the faces of the others that they didn't share his optimism. Part of Moki felt hurt to be dismissed like that. The other part felt they were right. She wondered if there still was the version of Moki they would remember somewhere inside her. Maybe it didn't want to be found.

Su'set told Moki she had a destiny bigger than she could imagine; that she still had a lot to train for before she could be ready to venture to Ni'Yon.

"We need to prepare you for your role in the next Green Wave."

HARNESSING CHAOS BOOK II:

# TERO AND THE CAVE OF THE ANCIENTS (PREVIEW)

# Chapter 1

It wasn't actually black until after it was processed. Until then, the skin of the brittle dark leaf was a deep red. As it grew, it phased through three vibrant shades that Tero looked forward to each season before arriving at the crimson colour. In the past, there had been a blight that had affected a majority of the crop and he had to wait numerous seasons to fully see the luminosity of those colours return. In his hand, the red fibres pressed up like a brittle skeleton through the crimson skin of the leaf. The fibres looked healthy.

It would be a wonderful harvest. Tero examined the leaf with his index finger and felt the waxy residue on the inside of its curled form. He pressed his finger to the tip of his tongue and immediately felt a warm tingle

with a bitterly acerbic aftertaste that lingered on his tongue. He spat a few times and rubbed his tongue on his sleeve pushing the fabric of his coat back to reveal flashes of the tattoo on his wrist that read: 3-12-13.

"Nice colouring," An overseer said from behind Tero.

"Thank you, sir," Tero responded, tensely.

"And significantly ahead of the festival. Good for you," the overseer smiled, darkly. "I see you didn't want to follow your predecessor into the flames. Well, don't worry," he slapped Tero's shoulder. "Others will know about your success."

Last season's harvest yielded far less than the acceptable quota and wasn't even ripe in time for the festival. That had been the second season in a row. They only learned afterward that it was due to a new strain of black leaf blight. This one had not been as pervasive as the original blight had been. It delayed the blight's detection and identification that much longer and allowed it to spread farther unnoticed. Tero's former superior had been sent to the flames at the last festival promoting Tero from assistant to the lead harvester for that season in his absence. He was one of the youngest to ever hold that honour.

Tero was only 7 generations past the educational camp but it was his idea that a fungal infection of the roots might be contributing to the weak yields. His idea not only revealed that a milder form of the blight had

been tagging along with the fungal spores but allowed them to recognize the new blight variant had caused the previous season's crop to under-perform. In fact, they were able to salvage the current season's crop and greatly increased yield and the speed at which the crop matured. Tero was instrumental in discovering the anti-fungal compound that eradicated both the fungus and the blight from this season's crop.

Without another word, the overseer moved on from Tero and resumed his inspection. Tero exhaled and felt the blood pounding in his ears. Even the mention of the flames sent a shudder rippling through him. He'd seen seven festivals in his life from their side of the wall. The Twos looked down on the festival grounds from their opulent balconies that curved out from the lip of the wall. Those selected for the flames would be returned to in the coming Os as newborns at the hatchery but it was little consolation for the supreme agony and fear experienced by those selected. Tero often wondered if the newborns remembered the sound of their skin bubbling and popping, their screams as they writhed around inside the flames as their old bodies were *purified*.

"3.12.13," a newly educated harvester whispered; their tattoo said they were from house 71. "Are you alright?"

Tero had been gripping the black leaf stalk so tightly it was contorted and cracked at wild angles in

his fist. Some of the pieces of the leaf had fallen to the ground at his feet.

"Pick those up before the overseer returns," the harvester motioned, hastily and Tero picked them up and dropped them gingerly into the wicker collection bin.

# Chapter 2

Tero should have been enthusiastic about the extra work-less leisure before the festival. For everyone working in patch 6, their portion of the harvest was over. Instead, he couldn't stop thinking about the flames. Over the last few festivals over two hundred workers were had been selected. There were rumours that it would be even higher this season. All that remained was for the newly educated to physically harvest the black leaf crop and send it through the wall for processing. It was almost unheard of that Threes would have any moments of work-less leisure before the harvest festival. Tero was grateful that the overseer for patch 6 had granted them rest. He was also anxious about unintended consequences of work-less leisure.

Tero returned home to the thirteenth house of the twelfth district. 3.4.87, his closest friend, was from the eighty-seventh house in the fourth worker enclave.

Workers in *the fourth* dealt with the operations of the mine while *the twelfth* dealt with the cultivation of black leaf. Those from the fourth often weren't home until long after dark.

Tero was the only one from *the thirteenth* house who'd been granted leisure time. The others were at their respective positions and were still working. Until the others finished, he was alone with his thoughts.

A friend of Tero's had been apprehended a few Qi'Ar ago after a drunken rant about Red Eyes became heated and they'd picked a fight with an undercover member of the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos. None of the 3.6.43s had been seen since his rant. Tero assumed he would see them all again in the flames.

Over the generations there were hushed whispers of dissent growing among the many worker enclaves but only recently had the whispers become vociferous cries for revolution. 3.4.87 had told him they'd heard credible gossip from the third worker enclave who had taken up their pick axes against the Red Eyes. Official sources proclaimed that most of the dissidents were swiftly apprehended and the entirety of the third enclave was expected to be seen in the flames. More and more, Red Eyes were randomly transferring workers from one enclave to another. Tero had seen someone with

three sets of tattoos. The first two had been painfully covered over in long painful strokes of fat, black ink. Though one could never truly know if a new addition to an enclave was actually a fellow worker or a Sen'Daris Er'Ebos plant meant to root out dissenters.

Tero often thought about what it would be like if he or 3.4.87 would ever be transferred to one of the enclaves by Atlen; the city beneath the field.

The closer to Atlen, the closer an eye could be kept on them. Then, they'd only see each other once per season, at most. Or possibly ever, if the Twos wanted to be petty and cruel; and they usually were.

Although, lately, Tero was more concerned about 3.4.87's attitude in public sending him to the flame himself. At first, 3.4.87's subversion consisted of whispering anti-Red Eye sentiments in the recreational dome at night when most others were asleep in their houses.

Two Qi'Ar ago, a large blue eye, the symbol of the resistance, had been painted on the side of the tavern in the centre of the enclaves' recreational district. The tavern owner's companion was selected for the flames as punishment for the owner not keeping *a close enough eye on the goings on around his establishment*. The tavern was largely empty since then. No one really wanted to spend any time near the blue eye lest an undercover Red Eye get the wrong idea and selected them.

3.4.87 had said the tavern owner was still washing the paint off when he'd passed on his way to work. Thought of the tavern made him want to drink his anxious mind into oblivion but also didn't want to be the only person there. He remembered he had a bottle of pori under the cot he'd hid from 3.4.87 the other night when his tongue was getting a little too loose. Silently, he sat in the dome, cross-legged on one of the house's cots, contemplating the next few ossa.

3.4.87 burst in to the dome, excited and animated. Tero yelped and knocked the last of the pori onto the dirt floor.

"3.12.13! The world is new!" He shouted when he saw no one else in house thirteen; then quietly added using Tero's chosen name instead of his assigned number: "Tero. They are lying to us."

Tero surveyed 3.4.87's face. He didn't look intoxicated.

"What are you talking about?" Tero stood up and a wave of dizziness swam up his spine and sloshed around inside his head.

3.4.87 laughed as he noticed the overturned bottle of pori.

"Are you drunk?" He hugged Tero and kissed him. "You little rebel."

Tero tried to slur out a response but 3.4.87 cut him off.

"All I've said to you. It's true. We found a . . . it's a

. . . a tunnel, Tero … we found a tunnel in the mine," 3.4.87 was smiling wildly. "It's like nothing I've ever seen. Smooth walls, absolutely smooth, that seem to lock together. We didn't have a portable lantern so I came back to-"

"Wait, how did you get past your overseers, where are 3.4.22 and 3.4.65?"

"They're still there. No overseer has been by in long enough that we don't expect one. And the guards are only posted at the main entrance to the mines anyway. I told you, I think they're still dealing with the third worker enclave and don't think we're paying attention here; or need supervision,"

3.4.87 smiled.

"Well, obviously they were wrong," Tero was trying to force himself sober but he could feel the room gently spinning.

"Luckily for us," 3.4.87 reached around Tero to grab the lantern beside his cot where he'd been drinking in solitude. "We have to get back there. I need to show you this tunnel. We don't know how far it goes. The lights in the mine don't extend very far once you enter the tunnel." 3.4.87 grasped Tero's hand and pulled him out of their dome and into the night.

# Chapter 3

The mouth of the side entrance to the mine was indeed unwatched when Tero and 3.4.87 approached. The normal buzz and glow from the field that spanned the space above their valley was conspicuously absent from the side entrance, which seemed deliciously forbidden and gave Tero pause. He'd never seen such shadow under the field. It's glow constantly bled down on them from peak to peak of the mountain range that walled them in. The field, it was said, was the only thing repelling the world-ending catastrophe the 3s had caused when they released the Green Wave.

The light was swallowed up beyond the edge of their lantern as they entered. The dim red lights

fastened to the ceiling in sporadic, haphazard links made the opening look like the ghoulish maw of some massive beast. There was something ominous or final about the dimly glowing red maw as they approached. He couldn't tell which. Tero swallowed hard as they entered.

3.4.87 led Tero through the twists and turns of the tunnels cut through the mountain. 3.4.22 and 3.4.65 were standing on either side of the hole in the cave wall that opened up into this new tunnel.

"13 has the lantern," 3.4.87 said as they neared.

"22 and I think there may be something in the tunnel," 3.4.65 said. "We keep hearing scratching noises."

"65 thinks he hears something," 3.4.22 corrected. "*I* think it's in his head."

"You heard it too," 3.4.65 turned to stare at 3.4.22.

"But the something you think you heard and the something I think I heard have different levels of malevolence," 3.4.22 laughed. "I think it's some animal. From listening to 65 you'd think it was an old monster from the stories they tell to deter children from leaving the enclaves and exploring the woods or the mountains and the field."

3.4.87 smirked as he took the lantern from Tero and passed into the tunnel. Tero was the last one in and he gasped. 3.4.87 was right. It was different, although its construction was reminiscent of the wall. Whereas

the city wall separating the worker enclaves from the city of Atlen was coarse and pockmarked, the walls of this tunnel were smooth with a sheen that reflected the lantern light along it into darkness. Tero ran his hand along the wall; over the divots in between the sections of wall that indeed looked like they were interconnected as 3.4.87 had said.

"Could the Twos have made-"

3.4.87 cut 3.4.22 off: "This looks different."

"Have you seen Atlen?" 3.4.22 retorted.

"Have you?"

3.4.22 was silent for a long moment before saying: "It might look like this beyond the wall. How would you know?"

3.4.87 just nodded, neither in triumph or defeat, and continued walking deeper into the tunnel. Tero considered what 3.4.22 had said but noticed that the walls were unnaturally smooth, like there was some kind of waxy sheen painted over-top the interconnected bricks. The bricks of the walls of Atlen were porous, coarse, and crudely pressed together in comparison.

"Stop," 3.4.87 whispered.

Tero's chest and all his muscles tightened. Tero ripped his eyes away from the walls and stared forward. There were pinpoints of luminous blue staring at them from the shadows.

"Monsters," 3.4.65 took a step backward, almost into Tero.

3.4.87 continued forward.

"Bram, no!" Tero whispered hoarsely. "Bram!"

He called 3.4.87's chosen name again but he was already halfway between the glowing eyes and his friends who'd stayed behind.

Tero couldn't move, he just watched as 3.4.87 stepped further and further away. Anticipating a scream or some bodily thud, Tero's faced tensed into a grimace but then he heard laughter.

"More bricks," 3.4.87 shouted back to them. "Just more bricks. Glowing bricks."

The three who stayed behind walked gingerly through the darkness back to the circle of light radiating from 3.4.87's lantern. He pointed one of the glowing bricks out to Tero.

"There must be something in these bricks that make them glow. Look," 3.4.87 pointed to the bend in the tunnel where the lantern was almost unnecessary. Glowing bricks were placed at regular intervals that ran along the ceiling. The bricks were also inlaid at their feet to make intricate pattens on the ground that glowed upward. After the bend, Tero saw the tunnel in front of them run on for a staggeringly long distance, while also branching off into side tunnels again at seemingly regular intervals.

"Who made these tunnels?" Tero dazedly stepped forward through the light of the glowing bricks.

"The Two's, who else?" 3.4.65 said, picking up the

pace.

"87-" Tero stopped and realized that there were no chance of being selected and called Bram by his chosen name. "Bram is right. This doesn't look like the work of the Two's," Tero said.

"Who else could it be?" 3.4.22 asked.

"Ones," 3.4.87 said from the front of the group.

3.4.65 laughed.

"Ones? It's been generations and generations since the Ones left. We caused the green wave and they split us up into Threes and Twos before they left. Don't you remember your scripture?"

3.4.87 was silent.

Tero had not noticed before (or maybe he'd chosen not to) but now he was remembering 3.4.65 had cringed a bit when he'd called Bram by his chosen name. In confidence, 3.4.87 had told Tero about his misgivings of scripture. He was skeptical. But skeptics were selected for the flame so no one ever openly let on about their skepticism.

Tero didn't know how long they'd been walking in silence when 3.4.87 said: "We should head back and come again next Qi'Ar. I remember how to get back right now but I'm worried that if we continue any further we'll get lost. We won't get back unnoticed. They will come looking."

They all agreed that was the prudent decision and started back the way they came. Very faintly in

the centre of each of the glowing bricks was a little embossed symbol of an eye. He'd missed it until now. It was very subtle. It looked exactly like the blue eye that had been painted on the tavern's outer wall.

# Chapter 4

Once they'd reached the mouth of the tunnel, the four of them had tried to disguise the entrance. They continued until they were sure a overseer or a Red Eye would not discover the entrance for themselves before Tero and the others had a chance to return and map the tunnel.

When the light of Mōt was brighter than the light of the field, Tero had gone by patch 6 under the guise of seeing how the harvest was going. He tried to suppress the feeling of how weird it was that none of those he interacted with knew about the tunnels or knew the potential ramifications of said tunnels. He quickly returned to the house of twelve with paper and a few writing utensils hidden among the folds of his robes.

Ever since Bram had mentioned it the previous night, Tero was noticing how few guards and conspicuous Red Eyes were actually patrolling the eighth enclave. Maybe there was something to 3.4.87's theory about quelling problems in other enclaves. Eight was pretty quiet after what many called *the Great Purge* a few generations ago where one hundred and forty-five were selected for the flames from the eighth enclave alone. 3.4.87 had a former companion who was part of that Pyre.

3.4.87 was a few generations older than Tero who had not even finished his education when the Great Purge happened. He remembered instructors telling him and his fellow students not to be too mournful of those lost in the purge because it meant all one hundred and forty-five would be reborn the next season in the hatchery after their ogg were cleansed in the flames.

The scriptures said that the flames purified the souls of the wicked and restored their innocence making them new again.

3.4.65 talked about purification a lot after a close friend of his, 3.4.44, was selected early in the season for the upcoming festival. All were expected to be pious followers of the scriptures but 3.4.65 was markedly the most pious of their group. Tero knew that Bram was distrustful of 3.4.65 but hid it exceedingly well. Bram was distrustful of most people.

Once Bram, 3.4.65, and 3.4.22 returned from their assigned daily shift at mines they waited until Mōt had

left E'thur and they were left in the dull green glow of the field above them before heading back to the mines to map the tunnel. Tero was securing the papers and writing tools in his robe before heading to the door when there was an abrasive knock shocked everyone to attention.

"House Thirteen," the coarse voice said. "Open up by order of the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos."

The four exchanged panicked, darting glances. They tensely composed themselves and 3.4.87 opened the door.

"Worker," the guard dressed in red leather armour said.

The guard looked at 3.4.87s wrist and Bram noticed. He waited for the guard to strike him; or shoot him.

"There is a mandatory sermon taking place in the religious centre starting in 15 minutes and will run until curfew."

"Curfew?" 3.4.87 inquired and the guard glared at him.

"Excuse me, worker. Did you just address me?"

3.4.87 was silent and quickly looked down at his feet.

"A new curfew will be enacted from now until after the festival. You are to report directly to the sanctuary and stay there until curfew is announced," the guard said.

There was a pause and the four waited for the

guard to continue.

"Now!" He barked and the four left the dome and headed directly to sanctuary.

# Chapter 5

"The white birds brought death," the elder was saying at the front of the packed amphitheater.

"All of Te'a was at war. While the Y'nari were busy fighting amongst one another, the white birds turned on their masters; dispersing them to the winds. Atlen rose out of the ashes of that world because of the sage A'tok, the one whose vision and power shielded us all from the white birds and the green wave."

Tero sat beside 3.4.87 in the stone seats, the papers and writing tools still hidden in his robes.

"What are we going to do?" Tero whispered. "There's a curfew after the service."

3.4.87 was staring forward, silently.

Tero could tell Bram's mind was off somewhere

else thinking frantically for solutions.

"The Children of A'tok lived in a new paradise of his design for countless Os. Our saviour and protector from the destruction of the outside world, A'tok, sired mighty progeny who -"

Finally 3.4.87 spoke. "I don't think there is anything we can do tonight except head back to our houses and wait for inspection after curfew."

"But what about the tunnel?" Tero whispered.

3.4.87 was silent.

"A plague had ravaged the world and made the beasts mad and the crops wilt and the trees die," the elder said. "The Children of A'tok spent Os wandering the wilderness trying to escape the blight that had stretched out over the world before; stalked by the white birds that circled the skies."

Tero had heard these stories over and over (and over) again since his earliest moments in the education centre he could recall.

A'tok had been the founder of Atlen after the valley had first been protected from the Green Wave with the construction of the field. The Children of A'tok were said to have lived in harmony underneath its glow for generations until an uprising of greedy Pod'ka challenged the power of *the Dahk*; a title given to the spiritual leader of Atlen. The rebellion was eventually quelled and the new Dahk broke the Children of A'tok into three groups. The Ones, the Twos, and the Threes.

Only the purest most righteous were allowed to be a part of the Ones who lived in the Black Tower built into the mountain at the spine of Atlen.

Tero had never seen a One but then again, he'd never seen a Two closer than the balcony at the festival. Twos were given dominion over the Atlen and the resources beyond the walls of the city. The Threes are the offspring of those who rebelled. Threes were given into servitude of the Twos and Ones for their treason to be purified; through work or through flame.

Tero had zoned out for long enough to miss the elder speaking about the founding of Atlen. Now the elder was talking about the Os of peace and prosperity before the fall.

3.4.87 was still staring forward, deep in thought.

"We head back to the dome tonight and we think of a plan tomorrow," Bram said finally. "There's nothing else we can do tonight."

# Chapter 6

Tero kept waiting for guards to slam their fists on the door for a curfew check but it was almost morning and no one had come around. None of the four slept at all that Qi'Ar. Tero had gone back to Bram's house in the fourth enclave. Tero lay beneath Bram's cot. They'd draped a blanket over the edge to cover him from view. None of the other members of the Eighty-seventh house noticed when they'd returned. It wasn't necessarily unusual for members of different houses to spend the Qi'Ar at another's as long they were of the same enclave. Tero's presence would've been unusual and might have prompted the other members of the house to call a Red Eye to come retrieve him.

The others from four who belonged lay in the open

on their respective cots and stared up at the ceiling. They stained their ears for the most minuscule of sounds that would alert them to the presence of guards.

Usually there was the sound of the wind rushing through the massive turbines called *wind recyclers* that circulated the stagnant air beneath the green field. Even the sound of insects chirping out to one another at Qi'Ar had been replaced with an ominous, dead silence.

3.4.65, 3.4.22, and 3.4.87 left their cots to get ready for general roll call before they were expected to start work at the mines. Tero remained underneath Bram's cot, contemplating what to do with his leisure time before the festival. He waited until everyone from the house of 87 had left before crawling out from beneath the cot. He went by the tavern around noon and, not surprisingly, found himself among a select few who had been awarded time off before the festival.

The tavern owner, Atu, was looking despondent. His eyes looked absently out at the tavern as though he were looking through the walls and out into black emptiness beyond. Atu was one of only a few Threes who were allowed a name. Though Atu wasn't singularly his; it was given to all of the Threes who came to run a tavern.

Tero picked up his pori and moved over to the bar.

"Another?" Atu asked after he noticed Tero.

Tero shook his head and held up his half full goblet of pori as evidence.

"I'm sorry about your companion," Tero said after a long silence, thinking about how he'd feel if the Red Eyes had come for Bram.

Atu forced a smile. "He'll be reborn again in the next season at the hatchery."

Tero nodded, but inwardly Tero remained unconvinced. He returned to his house in the afternoon. He lay on the cot staring at the ceiling in silent anxiousness. The front door shot open and 3.4.87, 3.4.22, and 3.4.65 rushed in much earlier than expected.

"You're back?" Tero stammered. "I knew it was a ruse," Bram said.

Tero looked confusedly at his three friends who were getting ready for their excursion into the tunnels.

"There were no guards at general roll call," 3.4.22 said.

"None?" Tero was surprised.

"None to check curfew through the night, none at roll call in the morning, and none patrolling the mines," Bram said. "I think the rumours may be accurate. The Twos are busy trying to quell another rebellion in the harvesting enclaves on the other end of the valley."

"But what if they already have and they're on their way back? You're still supposed to be in the mines," Tero said.

"That's why we're heading back now," Bram smirked as he handed Tero his sandals.

# Chapter 7

The entrance to the tunnel was in a part of the mines that wasn't currently being worked on so there weren't any other labourers to ask questions when a black leaf crop specialist arrived at the mine with three miners. They quickly entered the tunnel and closed off the entrance as well as they could from the other side to make sure anyone who did happen upon the hole in the wall might not see it right away. Tero stared marking off their position on his map by lantern and drew outward as they began surveying the tunnels.

They came to the hallway with the glowing bricks and the first real intersection.

"Should we follow the left tunnel first and come

back and map the right before continuing on?" Tero asked. 3.4.87 nodded. Now that Tero was aware of the subtle eyes in the centre of the bricks he couldn't stop seeing them; staring at him. The left hallway ended abruptly in a square room that was lit entirely with an intricate mosaic of the luminescent bricks arranged on the ceiling. He put the lantern down at the entrance of the room and began taking in the strangeness of it all. The back wall was comprised of various inert knobs and buttons and displays that Tero and his friends had no words for.

Technology of its kind simply did not exist and they were at a loss for the meaning and mechanism behind any of it. There were chairs and a central table which were both covered in layers of dust. Arcing out from the right-hand wall was a panel of buttons and sliders framed by symbols Tero had never seen before. He tried to copy as close a facsimile as possible on the margins of his map. They left the strange room and backtracked to the main tunnel where they took the right hallway to another room.

Tero blinked back tears as they entered the room. The brightness was almost overpowering. The entrance to the room was bottlenecked by a narrow passage framed with glowing ribs that wrapped from floor to ceiling and then down again into the floor like a pillar of light in the centre of the room. After the bottleneck, the room opened up into a brilliantly white space that

looked agelessly clean (yet somehow Tero suspected it was ancient).

"Where was this in our scriptures," 3.4.65 gasped. "It wasn't," Bram said, coldly.

The far end of the room had a wall of knobs and buttons just like in the previous room but none in the group could make any sense of it. They returned to the main tunnel and proceeded forward. The branching rooms as they continued down the length of the tunnel shared a very similar layout; unnaturally bright light, strange technology, and a paradoxically antique newness.

They came across one room that was larger than the others that housed a breathtaking amount of the strange technology in organized heaps and standardized rows. At the centre of the room was what looked to be a bird made of metal, three times the size of Bram who stood slack jawed in front of it. Tero marvelled at the unusual metal bird. It too was inert.

As Tero neared and touched the feathers of the enormous bird they felt cold and artificial. He tapped his knuckles on one of the large feathers and a hallow, resonant sound echoed throughout the room. The feathers of the bird were the same colour as the walls in the blindly bright room, a luminous white.

He walked around to the other side of the bird but could not find a head or a beak or any kind of top to it; just the thick, white wings and a heavy body. There

was an audible thud in the hallway behind them. The four of them exchanged worried looked as they realized they were all present in the room.

They looked out into the hallway and quietly waited for another sound to indicate they hadn't just been hearing things.

"Hello?" 3.4.65 called finally and 3.4.22 slapped him in the shoulder and pressed a finger to his own lips.

Everyone else was still but Bram took a few steps forward. He broke out into a jog and disappeared through the passage and into the tunnel. The three remaining friends shared apprehensive glances before following after him. Tero tried to calculate how many footfalls he was hearing echoing about the tunnel as he followed behind but they all seemed like one jumbled cacophony of noise. Up ahead, Bram had stopped running and the others caught up shortly after; panting and trying to catch their breath.

"Whatever it was it's gone," Bram said staring down the length of the tunnel.

"How many intersections did we pass?" Tero asked as he tried to calculate it in his mind and tick them off on his map.

No one answered him but it was then that Tero realized why. Everyone else was focused on the muffled sound that seemed to be resonating from the walls.

There were voices and they seemed to be having

a conversation. Tero could pick out the words festival and balcony. Bram was pressing his ear up against the wall and motioned with a wave of his hand to continue down the tunnel. They followed 3.4.87 until they came to a large door that didn't have a handle, just a large rectangular frame built into an otherwise dead end. The voices on the other end were clearer now.

"The Pyre is my favourite part of the festival. Sure there's the fresh black leaf and ceremonial pori but there's nothing quite like sitting on the balcony overlooking the flames," one of the voices said.

"The smell," another said.

"Yes, that smell and the varying colours of the fire. Miners always turn the flame a slight blue. Have you noticed that?"

"It's something to do with the ore in the mines or something."

There wasn't a way for Bram to grip to pull open the door so he ran his hands along the edges of the door and the surrounding bricks. One brick felt loose under his touch and he pressed it harder. The brick seemed to give way and then returned to its position. He pushed it harder and felt an audible click as the handle-less door slid away, into the wall.

They stepped through and were in a room draped with ornate fabrics and long padded cots. There was a whir of movement behind them and the door slid back to its previous position. From this side you couldn't tell

that it had once been a doorway. This side of the door was made to look like any of the other walls in that space. Bram tested the bricks around the door again and found the corresponding mechanism to open the door from that side.

"Oh, that's in particularly poor taste," a voice said and the group tensed.

They'd been discovered. A pair of Twos in colourful, decadent robed stared down the Threes.

"Really?" One of the Twos said in a tone they didn't understand. The group was silent.

"Dressing like Threes on the Qi'Ar of the festival," the other Two said.

Tero had almost forgotten about the flames. The ceremony was due to start shortly. Terrifying thoughts came flooding over him, overpowering his mind. They were beyond the wall somehow and were inside Atlen and been discovered by Twos.

"Should we change?" Tero said after a long silence.

The Twos cackled heartily and pulled on lit sticks of what Tero could smell were processed black leaf.

"Such dark costumes," one of the Twos said getting closer and shaking their head.

Tero turned his wrist so that neither of the Twos would see his tattoo.

"Who made these for you? They're perfect," one of the Twos began touching 3.4.22's robes.

"You're right," Bram said grabbing the Two's

hand away from his inspection of 3.4.22. “This is inappropriate. Could we borrow something more festive?”

The Twos laughed again and directed them to a side room where clothes were hanging.

“You might want to shower first though,” the Two chuckled. “You’re all quite ripe.”

He pointed to the end of the room where water was raining down from the ceiling.

“Thank you,” Bram said.

He disrobed and entered the water. Hesitantly the other three began to join him and the Twos laughed riotously. They both continued to pull on the black leaf sticks and exhale the pungently sweet smoke.

“You’re an interesting group,” One of the Twos said and then left the room. “You’re taking this Three thing a little far. You don’t have to share the shower. We get it. Threes live an awful, drab existence.”

Tero moved to his own stall and braced himself for the cold shock of a shower but was stunned to learn the water was warm and clear and fragrant.

The showers in the twelfth workers’ enclave were icy cold and claustrophobic in comparison. There were aromatic soaps sitting in cradles made of dried roots at chest level. Tero washed himself and his matted hair and watched the brown water as it slid off his body and gradually became clear.

After the shower, the four changed into the kind of

ornate robes the Twos had been wearing.

Together, they left the bath house and entered Atlen.

# Chapter 8

Tero never thought he'd ever see what was behind the walls of Atlen. Before that moment, his only other choice would have been to join the Red Eyes. Threes could become a sort of honorary Two. Though, in reality, it was more akin to simply being a Three with the added ability to dole out violence. They were seen as traitors to their fellow Threes while remaining obviously (and conspicuously) beneath the Twos; something no Three could be allowed to forget. Although Tero would have no way of knowing the politics of all that. To him, the Threes who decided to join the Red Eyes seemed to be able to leave their bleak, drudgery and take part aspects of the life of a Two.

Very quickly, Tero realized being a member of the

Red Eyes came at a price. Threes never trusted any of the *two-and-a-halfs*. Tero had never earnestly planned to join the Red Eyes and had accepted early that he would never see the city of Atlen for himself. Though now he *was* there and it was taking every part of him not to outwardly show how in awe he was.

Tero noticed that Bram didn't look share his wonder. Instead, Bram's eyes darted around calculatingly, taking it in on a tactical level. To one side, they could see the wall (just not from the side they were used to). The wall didn't seem to look as large and imposing as it did from the Threes' side.

Bram decoded Tero's face and whispered to him, "it's because there are rooms beneath us that make up for the rest of the height. I'm guessing there must be another four or five layers of rooms beneath us from what the wall looks like from the other side."

Atlen's street level was populated with square stone buildings set apart from one another by alleyways that were covered by fabric. There were little shops that opened up to the street and it looked as though the second floors of every building were used as residences. Tero enviously noticed they only seemed to house one occupant.

They passed shops selling items that Twos would adorn themselves with. They were made up of sparkling rocks and painted fabrics that they'd wear on their heads. Tero didn't understand the practice as no one in

the worker enclave adorned themselves with anything other than their white robes. He'd never seen a Two though they didn't look and act the way he thought they would. He didn't understand the concept of currency either and starred bemused at a pair of Twos picking out items and exchanging pieces of metal pressed into a flat circle with the shop keeper. There was an older man speaking loudly just outside the next building in front of them.

"Speak with the Sibyl," the old man shouted. "Let her tell you about your future. Let her read what the next season holds for you."

*Her?* Tero never heard that term before.

"Her," he whispered to Bram but was told to hush. The four continued to the centre of the city where there was a massive structure that rose upward against the mountain; jutting up towards E'thur. Tero could see where the black tower extended through the field. He noticed how the skin of the tower changed colour as it past through the field. Tero felt eyes on him and he turned around. There were hundreds of eyes though none of them were trained on him or his companions. They all looked too busy dealing with whatever they were doing to notice four fellow Twos. None of them were anxious at all. None of them seemed worried about being eminently beaten or killed. Tero spent a long moment processing it all and when he turned back, Bram, 3.4.22, and 3.4.65 had entered the structure.

There was a thick scent of something he recognized to be the substance the other Twos were enjoying in the bathhouse. The main floor of the structure housed nearly a hundred Twos sitting or lying on various objects and smoking the substance Tero believed to be black leaf and staring into glowing orbs. They stretched out and looked to be in a state of supreme relaxation while some seemed giddy and inebriated. The giddiness kind of reminded him of the effects of too much pori but whereas pori made one more energetic and productive, this black leaf seemed to have the opposite effect. They all seemed docile and languid.

"A taste of the black leaf, friends?" A Two in a gold-gilded black robe and matching cylindrical hat said.

He offered a pipe in the direction of Tero. Tero looked at Bram and couldn't read his face.

"I will, sir," 3.4.22 said.

"Sir," the old Two laughed. "No need for formalities here, friends. This ossa is the harvest festival."

The old Two lit the end of the pipe for 3.4.22 and as he pulled on it the bowl of pipe glowed a calming red the colour of the black leaf blooming season. After 3.4.22 was done, the old man passed it to 3.4.65 and then to Tero who all partook.

It finally came to Bram and he declined. "I'm taking care of my friends," he said.

"A noble gesture," the old Two smiled. "To have a friend as you for festival..." He moved on to other Twos

who were only now entering the structure behind them.

Very quickly, Tero noticed a change in his perception. The world around him seemed to glow in a newness that was at once optimistic and inviting yet also cast a gauze-like blur over everything. His head felt like it was humming softly. His anxiety was swept away by a rush of giddy euphoria. His eyelids were growing heavy and he didn't even mind that Bram was giving him a disapproving look. 3.4.65 sat down where he was and started giggling with a large smile across his face. At first Tero couldn't remember the last time he'd seen 3.4.65 genuinely smile but then recalled that it was before his friend had been selected for the flames. Not even that sombre fact could bring anxiety to Tero as the effects of the black leaf took a stronger hold on him.

All the Twos walking around the structure seemed to leave trails behind them as they moved. Tero chuckled as the feeling of motion tickled his insides. He wasn't moving but it felt like he was floating around the room in a circle; around and around.

"This is bliss," Tero sighed and 3.4.65 and 3.4.22 giggled.

"Well I'm glad you three are having fun," Bram said as his eyes scanned the crowd suspiciously. Tero was no longer worried about being discovered. In fact, he was no longer worried about anything. Never before had he felt such weightlessness and serenity.

"I'm floating" Tero cooed.

"No you're not," Bram rolled his eyes. "You're sitting on the floor like a fool."

"It feels wonderful to be a fool," Tero giggled and 3.4.22 and 3.4.65 concurred.

"Okay," Bram helped Tero up to his feet. "We should keep moving don't you think? Maybe head back to the bathhouse?"

"Already?" Tero tried to frown but found that his face wouldn't let him. Instead he giggled.

"Let's not press our luck, friends," Bram whispered as he assisted everyone into a standing position and lead them out of the structure back into the city street.

The change in scenery was at first overwhelming and Tero thought his knees might buckle. He gripped onto Bram and stayed upright. The sounds of the crowd swelled to a cacophonous roar and the heavy ossa-light streaming down from above caused Tero to squint. There was a long, resonant bleat from horns around the city. He recognized that sound. It was time to start the harvest festival and that meant starting the flames. The crowd seemed to change direction all at once and follow the same path to the city wall. The crowd began compressing at the stairs that led up to the viewing platforms. From this side of the wall, Tero could see that the small circular holes at the top of the wall had been very sizable viewing ports this whole time with an entire room where nearly thirty people could view the Pyre at each of the view platforms.

"You four!"

Tero heard a familiar voice shouting among the din.

"Hey, you four. From the bathhouse!"

Tero dazedly tried to pinpoint the source of the voice and found the Twos from earlier waving at them from a higher, more opulent, viewing platform.

"Join us!" One of them said. "We'll make room for you with us up here."

Bram gripped Tero's hand in opposition but someone in the crowd broke their grasp as they moved between them on their way to their own viewing platform.

3.4.22 and 3.4.65 followed Tero to the stairwell that led to an even fancier view-port where the Twos from earlier were waving them in. Bram apprehensively joined them after he realized it was too late to do any different.

"I recognize that look, friends," the first Two smiled. "Did you come from the temple?"

Tero didn't know if that's what the structure they'd visited was but he nodded anyway.

"Where are my manners," the first Two said. "I'm Su'endrus and this is my companion Arte'musan."

"3.12.13, 3.4.87, 3.4.22, and 3.4.65," Tero replied nonchalantly and 3.4.87's eyes grew large and wild.

Su'endrus and Arte'musan laughed boisterously. "Still pretending to be Threes I see," Su'endrus wiped a tear from his eye. "Well, at least you aren't wearing

those hideous costumes. What ever gave you the idea to wear costumes anyway?"

Tero shrugged.

The horns wailed again and Su'endrus rubbed his hands together excitedly. "It's starting!"

From their vantage point in the viewing platform, Tero was beginning to experience vertigo. They were now high above the festival platform looking down at four attendants who were rolling out a carpet to the centre of the platform and smoothed it all out once it was unravelled. To the right was the wall, pressing out at a ninety degree angle from the viewing platform.

Technically, Tero was once again on the Three's side of the wall. From this height, Tero could make out the domes of the nearest worker enclave which happened to be the fourth workers' enclave. To the left was a wall of Threes clamouring for a view of the Dahk and eventually the flames.

Looking down on his fellow Threes felt like a surreal, incongruous experience; the black leaf muddying his mind wasn't helping. The horns sounded again and two (narrow but unusually tall) red doors opened out from the wall and the Dahk emerged.

Tero only saw the Dahk once every season at festival and it always gave him a chill. There was something majestically sinister about the Dahk that Tero couldn't quite pinpoint; an Y'nari to equally revere and fear. The Dahk stepped up to the edge of the carpet and raised

his hands.

A hush fell over the crowd.

"There was peace in Atlen for generations until Io and his followers, his Akhu, destroyed that peace with their treasonous rebellion. The descendants of A'tok formed together in defence against the traitorous Akhu. They finally pushed them back outside the walls of Atlen. It is outside that the descendants of the Akhu will forever stay," the Dahk lowered his arms.

A Three attendant submissively approached from behind holding a sceptre and a ball of incense on a crimson red pillow. The Dahk gripped the scepter and struck the city wall with it. There was a groan of movement as a massive black painted door rose upward and disappeared into the higher levels of the wall. Behind the door were hundreds of Threes.

More than Tero had ever seen selected for the flames at any one time. The black leaf was beginning to subside and he could feel anxiety filtering back into his mind.

"Quite a lot of Threes this festival," Su'endrus said.

"There'll be a lot of new ones at the hatchery next season when they are all restarted," 3.4.65 said.

"Oh you are cruel," Su'endrus laughed. "I like you."

3.4.65 looked confusedly at him and it only made Su'endrus laugh harder.

"After the rebellion the Ones left us," the Dahk's voice bellowed from below them. "They were afraid that

the world they'd created, for us all, had fragmented; becoming unsafe for them. They left us, the Twos-"

The crowd of Twos along the walls cheered in an ominous roar.

"-to secure safety and prosperity in their absence. They reside now in the heights of the black tower, watching over us all. Waiting for their time to return. Every harvest festival, we must select the chaff from the crop. Only after the forty generations of Akhu, the children of treachery, have been sifted will the Ones return from their slumber inside the protection of the Black Tower to unite us all once again."

The selected Threes were prodded onto a platform above the Pyre by a group of Red Eyes with spears.

"Start the flames!" The Dahk yelled and the voices of the Threes below and the Twos along the viewing platforms blended together in a roaring in response. A contingent of Red Eyes lit the base of the Pyre which quickly erupted in a column of flame that licked upward towards the Threes waiting above.

"May you all find redemption in the next life," the Dahk said.

Su'endrus laughed and clapped a hand on Tero's thigh every time one of the Threes was prodded into the fire.

Tero could hear the screams of the Threes as they writhed around in the flames until they each became still only to have fresh voices continuously added to the

horrific choir of wailing. One by one, the hundreds of Threes were pushed upon the flames. Even before they were halfway through they needed to reform the fire and remove some of the charred bodies from suffocating the flame. Once they'd cleared away some of the bodies and added more wood onto the Pyre, they started again and 3.4.65 could make out his friend in the next batch of those meant for the Pyre.

3.4.65 whispered his friends number and Bram gripped his hand to silence him.

"What was that?" Su'endrus said, craning his next to see the next to face the Pyre. Su'endrus didn't wait for 3.4.65 to answer he laughed and continued, "Poor fools."

"What do you mean?" 3.4.65 asked.

"Those Threes are such imbeciles. Passively accepting the flame," Arte'musan laughed. "It's cute that they still believe they'll be reincarnated; excuse me, hatched. They're like good obedient cattle with that reward dangling in front of their dopey, idiot faces," Su'endrus laughed again and pulled on one of his black leaf sticks.

Tero could see pulsing hatred in 3.4.65 eyes and his fists clench together.

"Hatchery," Su'endrus scoffed. "Ignorant fools."

3.4.65 gripped his hands around Su'endrus' throat and grit his teeth down in the most hateful grimace Tero had ever seen.

"Die, you evil monster," 3.4.65 screamed as he pressed his thumbs into Su'endrus' windpipe.

Shocked and terrified, Su'endrus impotently swatted at 3.4.65's arms and face.

No one knew what to do. They were all just staring at 3.4.65 and Su'endrus, silently horrified. The two fell off their chairs and stumbled toward the edge of the viewing platform.

"Die!" 3.4.65 shrieked and pushed Su'endrus over the edge.

As he fell, Su'endrus gripped the base of 3.4.65's robes, pulling him along with him. To Tero, it all seemed to be happening in slow motion. He could see the moment that the volatile hatred in 3.4.65's eyes turned to shock and then into terror as the momentum of Su'endrus' fall pulled him over the lip of the balcony too. 3.4.65's eyes widened in the instant he realized he too was doomed. The two passed over the edge and finally disappeared from view.

3.4.22 and Tero raced to the edge of the platform too late, only to see Su'endrus hit the concrete but just in time to see 3.4.65 connect with a force that split his body open and spread his insides around the platform.

The Dahk stopped his speech and looked up, directly at Tero. He could feel his heart skip as Arte'musan gripped Tero's arm in disbelief and shock. He looked over at Tero accusingly but then saw the tattoo on his wrist. 3.12.13

"You are a Three," Arte'musan shrieked. "You're a THREE!"

3.4.87 threw a punch that knocked Arte'musan off his chair and he crumpled limply to the ground. Most eyes were still on the broken bodies of Su'endrus and 3.4.65 far below so few noticed as Bram grasped Tero's wrist and pulled him into the roiling crowd. 3.4.22 was at the view-port staring disbelievingly down at the body of his friend.

"He's a Three!" Shouted Arte'musan as he rubbed his sore jaw and stood up, pointing at 3.4.22. "He's a Three!"

A Red Eye appeared behind 3.4.22 and cracked him on the back of the head with a black club. Tero saw 3.4.22's limp body collapse against the wall as his image was swallowed up by the crowd.

"We have to get back to the bathhouse," Bram panted.

Tero's brain was still slowed and foggy from the black leaf and he felt like he was existing two moments behind reality.

In the confusion at the wall, no one appeared to be at the bathhouse but when they turned the corner there was a group of four Red Eyes pacing the street and they

"Hey, you two," one of the Red Eyes called to them. "Show me your markings."

Bram looked at Tero with a sadness he'd never seen before. Bram hugged him and whispered in Tero's ear.

"Try to lose them and meet back here. If I'm not here, just head back to your dome and I'll find you there."

Bram burst away from Tero, in the direction of the temple in the centre of the city. Tero was still dazed from the black leaf but had come down significantly and the impulse to run kicked in. Two of the guards broke off and followed 3.4.87 and Tero.

"Stop!" The guard barked from behind him and they were closing in fast.

Tero ducked under a shop's curtain only to be shooed off by the merchant, knocking him backward into some form of produce Tero had never heard of. Tero regained his composure as quickly as he could but the guard was almost upon him. He slid over the merchant's counter knocking over even more produce to the frustrated grunts of the merchant. He ran into an alley behind the shop and immediately realized it was a dead end, but not before the guard had blocked his escape at the mouth of the alley behind him.

"How in A'tok's name did you Threes get behind the wall?"

Tero squeaked an anxious reply yet no words followed. His throat was tight and his mind was ablaze with dark thoughts of being added the flames. He clenched his eyes shut and heard the guard emit a pained grunt but then there was silence. Tero kept his eyes shut even as he began to feel a warmness on

his back and shoulders. The warmness spread and sunk into him. He finally opened his eyes when the warmness bled into his fingertips and his whole body shivered. The room around him had grown even brighter than before and was still growing. He turned to face the light and the warmth hit Tero's chest. It was a calming, comforting light. And then the light became too much and he squinted and finally pressed his eyelids down tightly but the light continued to become brighter and brighter until he lost consciousness.

# … TO BE CONTINUED

# Moki and the Erased Ones

## Appendix

# Harnessing Chaos Primer

The world of **Harnessing Chaos** is called ***Te'a*** (tay-AH). It is broken up into three regions. The first region is called ***Asmita*** (OSS-me-tuh). It is a band of permanent dusk that wraps around the world and is the only of the three regions that is consistently habitable. Asmita is where the majority of life exists on Te'a. To the south is ***Ovin*** (AW-veen). This region is a scorched expanse of perpetual light. Ovin's forbidden wastes hide a technological oasis obscured by time and memory. The third region, deep in the north, is called ***Vol*** (VAHL). Vol is an icy, desolate landscape of eternal night.

The primary inhabitants of Te'a are the ***Y'nari*** (ee-NARR-ee). In the Age of Chaos, there are 7 Tribes of Y'nari:

***Sun'Ynarr*** (soo-NEE-narr)
***Mok'Ynarr*** (mo-KEE-narr)
***Qiat'Ynarr*** (kee-ah-TEE-narr)
***Ysat'Ynarr*** (ee-suh-TEE-narr)
***Vol'Ynarr*** (vahl-EE-narr)
***Osk'Ynarr*** (oss-KEE-narr)
***Tul'Ynarr*** (tewl-EE-narr)

There are three main celestial objects in the sky above Te'a. The first is ***Ka*** (KAW) - immovable, incapable of change. Ka is responsible for the intense, focused heat in Ovin and the habitable dusk of Asmita. Ka's complete absence in Vol makes the region bitterly cold and relentlessly dark. The second of the three celestial objects is ***Arkus*** (ARR-koo). Arkus seems to flit about the sky with no discernible pattern. It is seen as a morally ambiguous trickster. Finally, ***Mōt*** (MOTE) is the largest of the three and follows a predictable, dependable path in the sky. Mōt allows for the passage of days and the changing of the seasons in Te'a.

Time in Te'a is broken down into a system called ***the Ar'kon Calendar***. One ***ossa*** (OSS-uh) is the time between the rising of Mōt in the sky, it's disappearance beyond the horizon, and it's reappearance. A week in Te'a is called a ***senix*** (SEN-icks). A month is called a ***urix*** (YEW-ricks) and a year is an ***Os*** (OSS).

**1 rotation = 1 ossa**
**7 ossa = 1 senix**
**6 senix = 1 urix**
**6 urix = 1 Os**

The names of the 7 ***ossa*** (days of the week) are:

***Sin'a*** (sih-NA)
***Lis*** (LISS)
***Opox*** (OH-pocks)
***Ar'i*** (ah-REE)
***Rix*** (RICKS)
***Corsa*** (CORE-suh)
***Ev'Arok*** (eh-VAH-roke)

The names of the 6 ***urix*** (months of the year) are:

***O'sa*** (OH-suh) *Dawning*
***Sota*** (SO-tah) *Glowing*
***Ki*** (KEE) *Pyre*
***Ardos*** (AR-doe-ss) *Dimming*
***Pen'ar*** (peh-NARR) *Ember*
***Qi'Ar*** (kee-YARR) *Slumber*

The size of Mōt in the sky dictates the changing of the seasons. Mōt is largest in *Sota* and *Ki* and the smallest in *Pen'ar* and *Qi'Ar*. The names of the ***urix*** (months) are also the 6 divisions of each ***ossa*** (day).

There are four realms in Asmita. ***Tul*** (TEWL) takes up the majority of the central plains between mountain ranges. ***Aq'Adez*** (ock-AH-dez) is on the eastern edge of Asmita and runs from Ovin in the south up to the base of *the Labyrinth* where the lands become the realm of ***Ur'Bos*** (er-BO-ss). What had once been the ancient lands of ***Kent*** before *the Green Wave* cataclysm are now called ***The Blighted Lands***, which span the northern border Asmita shares with Vol.

Languages in Te'a have risen and fallen out of favour over the various ages. The most ancient of which is ***Y'vand'dbar*** (EE-van-DUD-uh-BAR) or ***Allspeak***. During the Age of Empires, each of the 7 Y'nari tribes developed their own dialect of Allspeak. Now, in the Age of Chaos the most common language spoken in Asmita is Tulean.

When there is an apostrophe in a word, the emphasis is placed on the syllable *after* the apostrophe. So ***Aq'Adez*** would be (ock-AH-dez) and *not* (OCK-ah-dez). The emphasis is on the first syllable when the word does not contain an

apostrophe. So ***Corsa*** is (CORE-suh) and *not* (core-SUH). The exception is when there's only one letter before the apostrophe. So in the case of ***R'nox*** and ***O'sa*** it would be (R-nocks) and (OH-suh) *not* (r-NOCKS) or (oh-SUH).

Under Tulean rule, gender is rigidly categorized as either ***Pod'ka*** (pod-KA) or an ***ur'ka*** (er-KA). Deviation from those two categories in public is a taboo that will attract the eyes of *the Tulean Inquisition,* the ***Sen'Daris Er'Ebos*** (sen-DARR-iss er-EBB-oss), who are tasked with keeping Tul pure. Those who do deviate from the binary call themselves ***uk'Sanpo*** (ook-SAN-poe) meaning: *my own soul*. In Tul, uk'Sanpo are derogatorily referred to as ***K'uk'pa'uk*** (KAH-ook-pah-ook) meaning: *outside and beneath*.

# The History of Asmita

The Tuleans created a calendar that was adopted, either willingly or forcefully, by the rest of Te'a. The start of the calendar began with *the Green Wave* in 0SL. After a full cycle of the seasons, the next S'ina Lis began. S'ina Lis was Allspeak for 'again at the beginning'. ***The First Age*** existed from the birth of the calendar to 1426SL after the resolution of *the War of the Four Realms*.

***The First Imperium*** was created with *the Declaration of Imperial Supremacy*, an edict that proclaimed the suzerainty of the other three realms under Tul. The edict legitimized the Ar'Kos Empire that stretched across all of Asmita. When the Empire finally fell in 1648SL, there was a time of instability called ***the Warlord Period*** which lasted from the fall of the Tulean's Ar'Kos Empire to 1763SL.

***The Second Age*** began after the decisive defeat of *the Warlord Confederacy* in 1763SL when *the Coalition of the Four Realms* banded together to bring order to the chaos of the age. Tentative borders akin to the boundaries of the First Age were established and an era of peace returned to Asmita. It was short lived as Tul believed they had been robbed of the territory they'd acquired in the First Imperium era.

In 1803SL, the Tuleans began various campaigns into the other three realms in an attempt to restore the full territory they'd once had in their legends after *the Great Sundering* when Argonos the Conqueror had overthrown the Ark'fey and first created Tul long before the introduction of the calendar. Tul's carelessly enthusiastic military leaders had spread their forces too thin. As a result, they could not quell the revolt that brought about the end of the nation's ambitions of a Second Empire.

The revolt that had toppled the Tuleans attempt at a Second Imperium was achieved through the combined efforts of Y'nari from all four Realms. The Tuleans themselves helped bring down their rulers when it was clear that the Empire only served the upper echelon of Tulean society. Everyone else was being pushed further and further into poverty or forced servitude.

Then came ***the Great Diaspora***.

The Second Empire had bled out from the inside when the majority of its workforce deserted their positions and fled Tulean cities. This diaspora left Tul struggling to execute even the most benign of tasks as those in charge of the structural integrity of the government had left along with the soldiers, workers,

and farmers. The ineffectual aristocracy was left in regal solitude to rule empty cities. Many were said to have died of starvation as they did not know how to prepare their own meals let alone hunt or farm.

***The Dynastic Era*** began with *the Return* in 2024SL. A Tulean Y'nari marched on the ruins of Ar'mot, the ancient seat of power of the Ar'kos Empire of the First Imperium era, with an army made up of soldiers and civilians of all the Four Realms. His name was Em'Itorok and his occupation of Ar'mot brought about *the Tulean Dynasty of Em*. His line ruled a newly formed Constitutional Monarchy which adhered to the boundaries of Tul during the Second Age. Kings of the Dynasty of Em were considered largely benevolent as rulers, if at times aloof and insular. The majority of their focus was concentrated on their capitol, Ar'mot, and the large urban centres of Tul.

By 2516SL, rhetoric about returning Tul to its Imperial roots was commonplace and even led to a ceremonial shifting of the title of the dynastic ruler from King to Emperor. It was in this period that Tul began referring to themselves as ***the Imperium***. However, government policy didn't change significantly along with its name. The Dynasty of Em continued until ***the Third Internecine War*** in 2624SL when Tulean General, Thrakis, overthrew Emperor Em'tornus and swiftly afterward began ***the Second War of Tulean Expansion***.

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